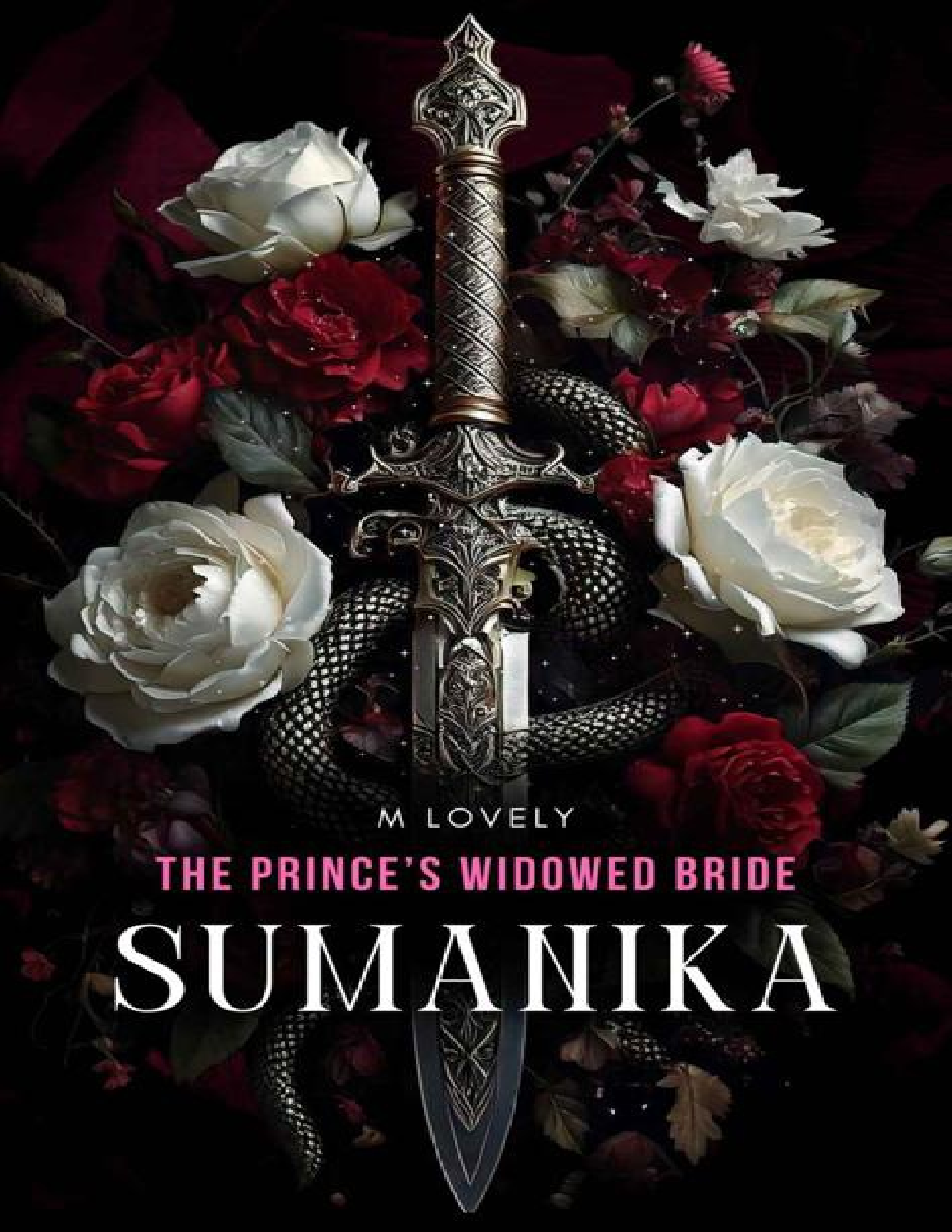
M LOVELY
THE PRINCE'S WIDOWED BRIDE
SUMANIKA

Sumanika ~ The Prince's Widowed Bride (Vol I)

The Saga Of Sacrifice And Devotion

M Lovely

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Cover design by: M Lovely

Be A Good Half-Wife.

And Turn The Pages Slowly.

Yes...

One By One.

She came like a flood, I flowed like the dirt
I burnt like a fire, she danced like a thunder
I calmed with her water, she lit with my fire
I won her with sacrifice, she ruled me with devotion.

M Lovely

Contents

Title Page
Copyright
Dedication
Dedication
Dedication
Dedication
Epigraph
Preface
Vol I
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya
Suman
Agastya

Preface

I welcome you aboard the journey of Suman and Agastya, a story with conflicts, touching the old Indian rituals, slamming the forbidden between a Prince and a maid, along with the imagination of a fantasy world built on the roots of Ancient India.

The book was originally written on a Ebook Platform and now adapted to Kindle.

It is divided into two parts (Vol I) and (Vol II).

This is (Vol I).

And, I really hope you enjoy it to the fullest, and as a new writer, pardon my mistakes.

Due to lack of resources, I have myself edited the book, created the cover and collected the courage to finally show it to the world.

I hope you won't hate for writing what I love.

—M Lovely

Be A Good Half-Wife.

And Turn The Pages.

Slowly.

Good. One By One.

Suman

A man dragged me to the center.

The cries of his family froze my body. Yet, a stronger cyclone was brewing inside me.

I felt entirely lifeless—death—closer than ever.

Life had always been dull, but I never imagined my end like this, to which I contributed nothing. Yet I would be lying on the pyre—all alive—only because I'd taken the seven holy rounds around the sacred fire.

I didn't know who he was. He never spoke to me or cared if I was well-fed, slept, alive, or dead.

In these twenty-three years of life, he never considered me his wife. He loved his mistress, but upon his death, I was called to hug him on his deathbed and let the intense, scorching flames of fire sear my skin until I melted and died. Non-consensually.

The tears fell from my eyes, not because my husband had died, but because I saw my remaining hope subside.

This world hated to see me happy. God knew what destiny had for me.

My family married me off at sixteen to a man double my age, who only cared to get between my legs. And, after he was done ruining every inch of me, he went to someone else.

I compromised with that, my life—focused ahead, but they couldn't help and called me to mourn his death.

But, Little did I know of their intention of pushing me to his pyre of the end, as our customs and traditions couldn't see a left woman live her life on her own and at her best.

The shutter of my eyes closed as four young men, seemingly sensible, tied my hands, added flowers, decorated the final bed of the deceased, and laid me—an offering for the man I wholeheartedly hated—to play with, even in the next of his lives.

Why?

Why did you make me a woman?

Why did you even give me a life?

Was I that terrible?

Did I deserve all this?

I broke into the cries, my screams louder than the mourners, mentally preparing myself to break all the worldly ties.

Yet, the cries of my soul, feared to be burnt alive, forced my hands, my fingers stretching tight, "Ahh," groaning in pain to get rid of the rope of binds.

"Please! I beg you, please don't do this! Please," my voice broke, vision blurred, skin sweated, nose filled with incense and flowers, signifying the end of the last ritual, beginning the end of mine.

"Please, I don't want to die," I screamed. The noise of his father's footsteps approaching closer with a water pot hanging bent on his shoulder, eyes filled with tears, heart deprived of humanity, and mind washed for traditions, filled my ears.

I shook my head, moved my legs, and raked my eyes, searching for the hope, a spark, a breath of care for a life.

I knew I was no one. But, I was someone!

There was a soul inside me—memories, experiences, people, smiles, and pride. Weren't there any among the tribe?

His father marched around the pyre, spilling the water.

I called, begged, and preached, "Please, I beg you, please. He left me alone. I am no longer his wife. He never considered me one. Please, please, I am begging you, leave me, please," unable to settle that I was about to die.

He left the pot, breaking it into pieces, sending shivers down my body and raising the chills in my mind.

I cried.

Cried louder.

My screams penetrated through the thick silence, waiting to be filled with the smoke of a live burn, unable to reach the deaf ears around me.

My soul hid somewhere deep, trembling and wheezing, flooding my mind with memories of Nandani, Daadisa, and everyone who was, and even those who weren't, my home.

I didn't want to die. Not like this. What was my mistake?

"Please, I am begging you, please, leave me, please," my cries only grew louder, my throat burning, the ropes leaving marks on my wrists. But their souls were darker than the devils.

They do this and still ask why cataclysm happens.

"Please, someone help, please, leave me," the base of my hair filled with sweat, noticing his father grabbing the burning wood and lightening someone alive and dead.

I hastened, stretching myself. My ankles grazed against the jute, my pleads worrisome—feared.

But amid the noise, I heard the fire breaking under me; the smoke erupting, clouding, hiding, forcing, enveloping, and finally welcoming me.

"Please, I am begging you, please, do not do it." I screamed, shattered.

The glasses are lucky—at least they get picked up and thrown comfortably. I was being crushed, silenced, and burnt.

My eyes closed. Misery surrounds me. My body was giving up, and my senses were failing.

Yet my soul screamed.

To be free.

"Please," I shrieked. "Ahhhhhh," heat dragging me, "Leave me please," I begged. Hardly audible. "I will kill you; leave me!" I even threatened.

But no one.

No one was alive.

If god loved the dead more than the alive, why did he make breathing so divine?

The sky, the trees, the dawn—everything was watching. The winds, the hiding sun, and the impatience of birds signify nature's crying.

And people—they stood dead. Enjoying.

I screeched, "Please, someone save me, please," one last time before the coughs clogged me, smoke puffed my chest, and flames shortened my breath.

One side of the pyre had caught the fire. My braid lay inches away. My body numbed, feeling the heat searing in the mound's bottom.

It hurt, "I am begging you, please leave me. I will do as you all say. I will never show my face to anyone." But I only screamed.

I screamed with everything I had. "Pleaseeeeee,"

No one listened, so I had to prepare for my heavenly adobe.

My clothes would catch fire, my skin would melt, my braid burn, a symphony of yelps would begin, and thunder of screams would erupt, scorching my cheeks, taking my eyes, thinning me to bones, and finally claiming my soul.

But.

"What the hell is happening here?" a loud voice said, sending chills down my spine. It gave birth to my hopes, a living me from my grave.

It seemed too late.

The fire licked my hair tail.

Everything turned into chaos. People started running. Finally, there were screams other than mine, pumping breaths to my failing life.

"Help! Please!" the remains of my strength struggled once more.

My gaze met a young man's allure, charged with the naked sword in his hand. A few soldiers in dark red clothes approached, untied me, and pulled me down, immediately brushing my burning hair tail with their bare hands.

"Are you all right?" one of them asked.

My knees faltered as I stepped away from the pyre, falling and breaking into tears. Bending forward, pressing my forehead into the ground, I let it all out.

Behind, a protest surged between the tribe and soldiers.

"You cannot do this. It is a sin. She needs to die."

"Do not do this,"

"Do not free her. It's a bad omen,"

"She is his wife... Stop!"

Among all the voices, I recognized a familiar tone laced with authority and frustration. "Are you all out of your minds? That's not allowed in Suryagarh,"

Pulling me up by the wrist, he put his arm around me. The immediate comfort made me lifeless.

A crowd emerged from the trees, brandishing sharp blades. He lifted his sword high into the air as well.

With my tear-filled eyes, I couldn't stop gazing at his sweaty face, speckled with dirt, and his wavy-curly hair dancing over his forehead. A faint scar adorned his cheek, and his mere warning was enough to send a shiver down my spine.

"Don't you dare come any closer, you bastards!"

I buried my face in his chest out of fear. "Help, please!" my inaudible voice emerged slowly as I heard the distant sounds of people screaming.

"This is not your Suryagarh and not your business. Put her back on the pyre, or you will all be lying over one by the end of the day." One of them said.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed hundreds from our tribe standing up for their ritual, outnumbering a few of us.

"This woman is from Suryagarh, and this cannot happen to her!" he stood firm on his grounds, never stepping back.

"Leave me. They will kill you, too," I murmured, clenching my fist on his chest before he looked at me.

"Are you out of your mind?" he shouted, shaking me to the core.

I burst into tears.

What was happening because of me?

People carrying swords and sickles ran toward us. The clash between them and Suryagarh's soldiers pierced my spine.

Smoke, screams, and blood filled the air.

He pulled me backward and ordered, “You stand here,” gently leaving my hand.

I fell to the ground.

“You must go back, Kunwarsa; your wedding is in six months. Please don’t do this for me. I’m just a maid,” I babbled.

He stood before me, hiding me, gripping the sword. I pulled my knees closer to my chest, breaking into the sobs, my face down.

Swords’ clash intensified.

I couldn’t help but gaze at Kunwarsa, handling a group of tribal sickles against his sword.

Suddenly, someone struck his biceps, and the blood splashed on my face, scaring me to death.

He yelled deep.

“Please, don’t do this for me,” I shivered, “You’re the Prince; you shouldn’t risk your life,” the mere possibility of him losing grounding me worse than being burnt.

Why was he doing it?

How did he even end up here?

How did he know me at all?

He plunged the sword into a tribal’s stomach, "Aaahhhh,"

My heart raced. Blood was pooling around.

Suddenly, a group of a dozen trapped him, falling him to his knees, piercing his skin from all the corners.

No, no, no, no.

“Don’t do this,” I screamed.

Death was better. I couldn’t see anything happening to him.

I immediately got up and ran toward the burning funeral pyre.

But Kunwarsa grabbed me and pulled me back.

I screamed. “Leave me alone! I deserve this. Please don’t kill anyone for me. Don’t do this. I deserve it,” I cried out.

The soldiers diverted the killer’s attention, pulling them away from Kunwarsa.

He pulled me to his chest, our knees crashing into each other, and when I protested, he landed a sharp slap on my cheek, watering my rage and yelling furiously. “Stay Here.”

I burst into crying.

"Please, it's your wedding in six months; do not do this for me.”

I could hear swords clashing, and then, I noticed an even louder noise as a crowd rushed towards us. Around fifty people encircled him, assaulting from every direction. I looked at my late husband’s father, who gripped my hand and started pulling me away.

“Leave me!” I yelled. His hold biting on my grazed wrist as he dragged me through the mud, dirtying my white attire.

“Kunwarsa” I yelped.

He killed people mercilessly, one by one, his clothes stained with the blood of his and theirs.

A coppery taste lingered on my tongue, seeing so much bloodshed. He thrust his sword into the stomach of another person and yelled. "Leave her alone, I said," and sprinted towards me.

He held my hand.

I was being pulled from both sides: the deceased’s father and Kunwarsa.

“Let go of her hand. She needs to die with him. Don’t bring the wrath of the gods upon yourself. Leave her,” the father yelled at him, and Kunwarsa punched him hard, knocking him to the ground. He cried out in pain.

Kunwarsa pulled me closer, his steel-strong arm wrapping around my waist as he moved forward with his sword. “This is wrong. She wants to live; let her live. She wasn’t a burden to him. She is on her own and doesn’t deserve to be killed like that.” He argued, and I cried, burying my face in his chest and collapsing to my knees in despair. He also sank to his knees and tightened his grip around me.

“She is a widow. There’s no life for her; no husband means no support and nothing left. She needs to give up on her life,”

“Yes, she needs to be tied to that pyre. You are sinning,”

"Leave her, or we will kill you. This is our ritual,"

"Leave her alone,"

I heard the distinct voices of people yelling at Kunwarsa, and he inhaled deeply. “She is our responsibility. Suryagarh will take care of her. She belongs there; she works there, so you don’t need to worry about her. Consider her dead already, and let her…live,”

“No! We can’t do this and make our gods unhappy. His soul will never rest in peace; she needs to die along with him,” the people argued.

The frustration was visible on his face. “You all are sick. She is not an animal but a human being, a woman. If she doesn’t want to die with him, don’t force her. She wants to live,” he yelled.

I clenched my fist tightly against his chest. His heartbeats poured into my ears, and a cold sweat bead crawled down his jaw and fell onto my neck. He placed his hand on my head.

“I won’t let you kill her in front of me,” his voice was firm.

The father asked. "Who the hell is she to you? She is just a maid in Suryagarh. Why the hell are you even trying to protect her?"

He breathed shakily, “She means nothing to me, but she is still a human, and if she wants to live, she… will.”

Another man said, “She cannot live like that. There is no life for a widow in our tribe; she needs to lie on that pyre.”

“She won’t, and I’ll make sure of it.”

“What the hell can you even do? Look at us and look at you. You can’t protect her alone,” the man argued.

"I am the Prince of Suryagarh, and you know what our army can do,” He raised his voice.

“How easy it is for you to threaten us because we follow our customs,” one argued. “You can gladly kill us, and we will be happy to get killed while protecting the happiness of our gods. She needs to be served by the God of Death along with her husband, or neither of them will ever find peace,”

“No one will touch her. Either I’ll kill you all, or you’ll let me take her from here with no hassle,” he declared.

Suddenly, a soldier whispers in his ear, “It doesn’t work that way, Prince. If you want to protect her from them, she either needs to die or get married to someone else. I know this tribe; even if you take her away, they will keep searching for her, and one day, they’ll kill her because they believe her deceased husband will never find peace without her death.”

I trembled, breaking apart, and he looked at me with worry on his face. For a moment, I felt lost, staring into his caring eyes.

“Who will marry her this instant?” he asked, looking away at the soldier.

“You can ask them if any of them wants to marry her.” Soldier replied.

My body was trembling.

“She will marry someone,” Kunwarsa announced.

I shut my eyes tight. I didn’t want to. I wanted to go home.

"Who?" they asked in unity.

"Anyone who wants to marry her," He murmured.

One of them chuckled. “Who will want to marry such a bad omen knowing he is going to die, eventually?”

Kunwarsa patted my head as I cried uncontrollably in his arms and argued, “We all will die, eventually. How is she a bad omen? It’s not her fault that her husband died; she wasn’t even with him all this time.”

"Why don’t you marry her, then?"

A strong shiver ran down my spine, and I immediately opened my eyes.

“No!” I interrupted. “He cannot marry me.” He gently placed his palm on my mouth, pressing my face into his warm chest. My lashes were forced closed. I could feel our hearts beating loudly.

"I will, but let us go," he offered. I shivered with fear. This could not happen—not at all.

A few objected, “Marry her now. We don’t trust you. Or leave her alone here; let us finish our ritual.”

I looked at him, sniveling. The bloody sword was still hanging in his hand. The rage filled his eyes as he turned to look at me. I hid my face, unable to meet his gaze. I knew nothing.

Let me die. Don’t do this.

“You should not do this. Your bride will not like it. Please,” I protested, muffling and crying.

“I will,” he decided, and I was stunned, noticing the faint sound of him cutting his thumb against his sword.

I hid my face even more and shook my head terribly.

“No, No, You are a Prince, and I am just a maid. You cannot do this,” I argued, but he cupped my nape tightly and made me look into his eyes.

Tears streamed down my cheeks uncontrollably as I felt him touch the top of my forehead and fill the part in my hair with his thick and warm blood.

I burst into tears and immediately tried to wipe his blood off, but he grasped my wrist and pulled me closer. I sobbed.

“She is mine now!” he shouted. “Touch her, and you will all burn alive on your pyres!”

He wrapped his hand around me, reminding me of the time he accidentally threw color at me during Holi. The thought of his family finding out numbed me. What had just happened?

He picked me up and stood tall. “She is dead to you all now. Never try to look for her,” he stated, stepping back and mounting me onto his horse. He quickly settled in behind me, and I turned to see the soldiers trailing him as we rode off. The din of the crowd diminished as the horse galloped faster.

I looked at my white clothes stained with his blood and his hands adorned with the engagement ring. It was only six months until his wedding, and I had ruined everything for him.

A strange tension was building between us, as I didn’t know where he was taking me.

We bounced on the horse, feeling his chest hit my back. I felt vulnerable. I tried to maintain distance.

But he tugged the horse's reins with one hand and wrapped the other to keep me from falling.

I sat in silence, stunned.

Once we reached a spot far from the horror, he dismounted and helped me down. He glanced away momentarily, checking if anyone followed.

I wiped a tear off my cheeks and looked around—a small river winding through the woods. The sun was setting, casting an orange and red glow across the sky.

"Come with me," he ordered, walking into the forest while holding his horse's reins and walking him along.

My feet froze. Being alone with a prince felt too heavy on my shoulders, especially since he was to be married in six months. I couldn't torture his image. My gaze scanned the surroundings, considering all the possibilities I might face alone with him.

But I didn't have any choice. Clenching my trembling fingers, I followed him quietly. The scent of mud was strong after the rain. The trees had a different shade of green, reminding me of his eyes.

I shook my head.

"Suno," "Hey," he shouted, and I looked at him. He stood a few meters from the river, and I stopped a meter away from him. "You should clean yourself. No one can know about this or what happened today," he exclaimed, and I understood. "Ji,"

"I'll get you a pair of clothes. Just wait for me here," he added, stepping away. I grabbed his wrist, looked at him with tear-filled eyes, and shook my head. He held my wrist back, pulling his hand away. "It's okay; nothing will happen. Just stay here,"

I cried, forcing. "No, please, don't leave me alone." He inhaled deeply. "Fine, I'm here,"

I strolled towards the river. The sound of running water weakened my knees as I approached closer. At that moment, everything seemed capable of killing me. Kneeling, I leaned forward to cup the water in my hands. And, noticing the dried trail of blood in the partition of my hair, I froze.

I was his wife now.

No! He only did it to protect me. It was just the need of the moment.

I closed my eyes and splashed water onto my face. Once, twice, thrice, until the last drop of his blood was washed away, along with my hands and feet. Afterward, I returned to the spot where he had been waiting for me, and suddenly, he grabbed my wrist.

My eyes widened with shock.

"Come with me," he said, scorching my grazing wrist. The touch felt a little uneasy. However, my soul didn't seem to mind. I knew he was protecting me, so it shouldn't feel wrong.

"How did you find out about me?" I hesitated, questioning, "I mean, why did you come here?" as we walked through the mazes of the trees. The dusk was darkening.

"I read the letter you received. We make copies of all letters that arrive in Suryagarh and keep them for safety reasons. While searching for a letter in that copy, I came across yours, which mentioned that your husband has died and that you are being summoned. You didn't share everything with Bhabhisa, which made her worry about you afterward. While speaking with Bhabhisa, I learned about your tribe's custom of burning wives with their deceased husbands. So, I came here and saved you. However, I didn't know that your people could be so wild and that the entire village would come to slaughter me."

He turned to me, adding, "No one can know what happened there—not what transpired between us. I did that only to protect you; now you are completely safe. You can live your life as you did before. I won't bother you, okay?" in a serious tone, and I nodded slowly. "Ji, thank you so much for saving me, but you didn't have to do that. I'm just a maid, Kunwarsa," I couldn't stop myself.

"I would have done the same for anyone in your position. Don't think of yourself as special," he replied dryly, leaving my hand in front of a small cottage. "Come inside," he said, pushing the door open and stepping inside.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest as soon as I noticed the darkness in the cottage.

"What is this place?" I asked, hiding my fear. "You don't need to know." He responded curtly.

Yes… of course!

Stepping inside, I felt the dirt beneath my feet. But the cottage had a strange warmth. No one had visited here in years. The dim light streaming in through the small hollow in the wall fell on the dry leaves, a small trunk, and a few earthen pots in the corner.

He walked over to the trunk, and I paced back in fear. I didn't know where we were, and the mere thought of someone discovering us together felt worse than death.

The air was thick, making me uncertain about how to confront him in the Kingdom when we returned. Plus, Nandani would inundate me with questions and interrogate me.

"Here," his voice caught my attention. He handed me a pair of maroon attire. It was used, but I didn't dare ask to whom it belonged and muttered, "Thank you."

"You can't go back to the Kingdom wearing these." He gazed at my white clothes. "Bhabhisa will worry, and I don't want to add to her stress right now. She's already suffering, and knowing what happened might impact her health," he explained, and I

nodded, swallowing quietly.

His Bhabhisa was the queen of Suryagarh and was never arrogant toward anyone. She had always regarded me as her best friend, and she was currently unwell because of her pregnancy. That's why I couldn't tell her everything.

"I know, Kunwarsa, and please don't worry. I won't tell anyone about what happened. I understand you did that to protect me, and I can't even think of myself as your wif…" My heart came to my mouth as he cocked his brow, "I mean, that position in my dreams. Everyone is so happy about your wedding that they should never know about it. I hope we can both forget this day and continue our lives as they were," I said uncontrollably, unwelcome tears streaming down my cheeks.

"And thank you so much for saving me," I added, "I don't know how I can repay you in this life. You didn't even think of yourself before doing that. I mean nothing to you; I'm no one. We haven't even spoken once, yet you came to rescue me. I will pray to God that you receive everything you desire in this world," with a trembling voice.

He stepped closer, and I immediately lowered my gaze and stepped back. But as he placed his hand on my head, I halted. The gentle weight, screaming protection, forced my lashes together. "It's okay. I can't stand seeing any woman suffer through that. Try to forget it as a terrible memory." His following words, "I can't bring your husband back, but time will heal everything," made me chuckle.

More tears streamed down my face as I shook my head. "Even if you could bring my husband back, I would never want that," I exclaimed, adding, "I need to change."

He pulled his hand back and nodded, "I am standing outside."

He paced out of the cottage and closed the door behind me.

My chest felt heavy as I lowered my gaze to the white attire stained with his blood. I still couldn't process what had happened. The memories of the flames, the smoke, the cries, the screams, and the blood weakened my knees, and I tried to calm myself down, closing my eyes, fisting my hands.

I would never forget that, nor would I forget the debt he owed me.

Stripping the *dupatta* and opening my blouse and skirt, I stood naked. My long braid hung low to my hips; the burnt ends poking against my skin. I wore the pair he gave me—the plain maroon one. After putting it on, I neatly placed the dupatta over my head and said, ***"Andar aa sakte hai ab aap,"*** "You can come in now," glancing around.

But when he didn't respond, even after a short while, tension thickened my blood and quickened my heartbeat. "Kunwar Agastya," I called again, clenching my dupatta. I stepped toward the door when he still didn't answer. "Kunwarsa," I cried out. Intense fear coursed through me, making my knees shake. It was getting dark; I didn't know where I was, and now he wasn't responding. "Please reply, Kunwarsa," my voice trembled with fear as I cautiously approached the door.

"Kunwarsa," I called again, pulling the door open. The creaking of the old wood sent a strong shiver down my spine. My heart raced wildly, and my breathing grew heavier than my eyes searched for him.

I stepped outside, looking around. With growing darkness, I could hardly see anything. The sounds of insects and the rustling of dry leaves stirred by the wind sent goosebumps. A profound silence surrounded me; I felt a storm raging inside. Tears filled my eyes as I moved further, calling out to him. "Kunwarsa, where are you?"

I clenched my hand tightly around my skirt and looked around. My steps were small and fearful. When I didn't find him, I burst into cries. "Kunwarsa," I called again.

Suddenly, a faint sound of footsteps rustling against the dry leaves, cracking the broken stems, approaching from afar, alarmed my ear. I spun to see him walking toward me.

I rushed in his direction.

Before processing anything, I moved closer, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist. "I thought I'd lost you," my voice trembled. Tears fell like a river.

He placed his hand on my head. "I just went to wash up in the river and pick some fruit," he explained, and I tightened my fist against his back even more.

My entire body shook. What if someone had taken me from here? I wasn't afraid of death, but the thought of being burned alive wouldn't leave my mind.

"Hey, hey, calm down. Everything is okay; you're safe," he said, nuzzling me away.

I nervously wiped my tears, looking at him. "You should have at least told me,"

"I told you to wait for me there. You didn't listen," he stated aguishly, and I immediately stepped back.

He was the prince; I shouldn't have hugged him like that. What was I even thinking?

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry," I said, taking a few more steps away before walking back toward the cottage with him, keeping my distance.

We both entered the cottage. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed his wet hair and his reasonably clean clothes. He had taken a bath.

"I got this for you to eat," he said, handing me two apples. I took them with trembling fingers and asked, "Do we need to stay here for the night?"

He sat on the floor, resting his back against the wall and nodding. "We don't have any options. My horse needs rest, too, and

the dense forest covers the path. It's not safe to travel at night," he explained in a tired tone. I lowered myself to the floor and wrapped my dupatta around me as snugly as possible.

I didn't know, but I couldn't accept that he had married me. It meant he was my husband now. No... Nooo!

"Aren't you going to miss your husband?" he asked, catching my attention and biting into an apple.

I gulped slightly, shaking my head. "No,"

He lowered his gaze to his lap for a moment. "Why?" The black soldier attire made of leather, adorned with long strings tied over his broad chest, caught my attention. I noticed a drop of blood on the silver fasteners. It must have come from my forehead after he… did that.

I took a deep breath, looking down at my fidgeting fingers. "He never considered me his wife," I said.

"How long had you been married?"

I blinked silently, momentarily. The weight was burdening. "Eight years," I said.

"How old are you? You look so young," he seemed shocked, inquiring.

"Twenty-three."

He inhaled deeply. "You got married at sixteen,"

I nodded, ashamed. "Yes, and the irony is I was excited to get married,"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because everyone told me I would get a new home after the wedding, that there would be someone to take care of me and all the dreamy things," I murmured, taking another bite of the apple.

"What went wrong then?" he asked, chewing on his apple.

I gulped, taking a pause. "Everything,"

He nodded.

My heart felt heavy under the weight of old memories. Those nights when I'd scream, and he wouldn't stop. The days when I'd look for a place to hide so he wouldn't grab me. Memories of his intoxicated state, in which he would hit and mock me in front of his friends, allowing them to touch me inappropriately to prove how unattractive I was.

"Do you have any... children?" he asked, gazing at me.

I timidly lowered my gaze and shook my head. "No, not my own," I said, biting my lower lip.

He asked. "Then who are these lent ones?"

A smile dared to appear on my face. "Teenagers of my late husband and his late wives,"

He raised his brows with a smile. "Wives?"

I nodded. "Three."

"All dead?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Interesting man," his smile broadened, adding after a brief pause, "I'm glad he's dead."

A soft chuckle escaped my lips.

"That's why you didn't like him." He asked.

I shook my head, gazing at him and replying, "I didn't have any issues with the past, but he was with me for only three months before leaving for another woman, claiming that I am not good… I mean, he said… there's something wrong with me… that I'm not a… good… woman for a man." The last few words came out hesitantly, and he exhaled deeply, looking away.

"Sorry…can't relate. I was born a man," he spoke, causing me to lower my gaze. Of course, he was a man. A True Man.

There was a long pause, and suddenly, he asked in a soft voice, "So, you haven't been... touched... I mean... for the last sev-,"

I gulped, shaking my head, lowering my gaze, feeling warmth in my cheeks and mousiness. This conversation didn't seem normal at all.

"And you never wanted to...? I mean..." he paused, curiosity clear in his voice, and I shook my head in response.

"Married women are not allowed to..."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Then you haven't met many," he said.

I hadn't. But his words twisted my stomach, and I looked at him.

"You're getting married in just six months…you should stop meeting so many women now. Women appreciate loyalty." I couldn't stop myself from saying.

His eyes darkened.

I felt fear run deep in my bones. A soft nod followed by him, "Don't worry, you'll never come in many." His words crushed my gut. I immediately shook my head, "I didn't mean th—"

"And I don't have much experience with women," he cut me off, pulling out a golden-brown sheathed dagger from behind him, "It has..."

A shiver ran down my spine. "You've killed women!"

He chuckled softly, lying on the floor, covering his face with a small cotton cloth, and adding, "Let me know if you ever want to get killed too. I'll gladly assert my rights."

I furrowed my brows, unable to comprehend what he meant. Why would I ask him to kill me when he had just saved me? I ignored him, lay in my corner, covered myself with my dupatta, and tried to fall asleep.

I woke up with chilling shivers coursing through my body and in the same place. My gaze immediately found him gone, racing my heart.

Standing up and placing the dupatta over my head, I approached the door. But before I could even touch it, it pushed open, revealing his towering figure.

I instinctively stepped back, watching him lower his head to enter the cottage.

"Where did you go?" I asked, unaware of my loud voice. He furrowed his brows, looked down at the floor as if searching for something, and then spoke.

"Sirf praan bachane ke liye maang bhari thi, patni nahi ho hamari." "I only filled your parting to save you; you are not my wife," his voice was dry, and I immediately covered.

"I know, I know, Kunwarsa. I just got scared of being alone. I'm sorry."

"Come on, let's go. I've arranged a small palanquin for you and a few soldiers to escort you safely back to the Kingdom. I'll come later, and remember, nothing happened between us. My marriage is important, and I can't afford any mistakes," he said.

I immediately looked away and protested. "I'm just a maid, Kunwarsa. There was no need to arrange a palanquin and soldiers for someone like me."

He stepped closer, and I quickly stepped back with wide eyes.

"Humse behas mat karo... jitna kaha hai utna karo." "Don't argue with me… just do what I say," he ordered threateningly, and I immediately shook my head.

"No, I will not go with the palanquin and soldiers. People will notice something is wrong. Just show me the way to Suryagarh out of this forest, and I'll manage on my own," I said, stepping forward to walk past him, but he stopped me by saying.

"Fine," I looked back at him. Your tribe will burn you once they find you alone. Didn't you hear? To stay alive, we must pretend to be married." His words brought back memories of yesterday, and I clenched my hand to calm my racing heart.

I didn't understand what was wrong with my life because every time I felt like things couldn't get any worse, I found myself in an even worse situation.

And now this. But it was only for today. Once we entered the kingdom, he wouldn't see me, and I wouldn't see him. I inhaled deeply, nodding in agreement. "Okay." then quietly followed him. I glanced at his hand, tightly clutching the dagger he had used to take so many women's lives.

What kind of man kills so many women yet saved me? He could have let me go; no one would have known who Suman was, but he saved me. He fought for me, earned scars, and married me to protect me. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. He was a prince; saving me was nothing for him. There was nothing between us, and there would be nothing. I just need to let it go.

After a while, we reached the palanquin, and I noticed two soldiers on horseback standing beside it. I sat in the carriage silently and heard him say, "Take her to Suryagarh, and don't let anyone know about this, especially Bhaisa."

As soon as he mentioned Ranaji, a wave of fear washed over me. He would surely kill me if he found out that his brother was married to save me.

As the lifters elevated the palanquin, I swiftly closed my eyes to soothe my racing thoughts. We progressed, and soon, we reached the borders of Suryagarh.

"You can come out now," I heard Kunwarsa's voice before I lowered my feet to stand. I stole a glance when he scanned our surroundings for safety, and he muttered, "You're safe from here. Go inside the Kingdom and tell any story you like, but don't mention th—"

"I know, I know. Don't worry so much; I understand you don't want your name associated with mine, and I don't want my name linked to yours, either." Meeting his intense gaze, I replied, "I've had enough of one."

He shot me a glare. I overspoke again. "I'm sorry."

It was all because of Nandani. Thanks to her kindness and my responsibility for managing hundreds of attendees, I had become loose with my tongue. I should stay within my limits with him.

He walked away, and I took a deep breath of peace. My gaze fell upon the massive walls of the Kingdom that had changed my life in every way. A smile lingered on my face.

Suryagarh.

While the Kingdom itself may not have changed my life exactly, the Queen of this Kingdom, Nandani, took a garbage like me and transformed me into the jewel she proudly calls her best friend.

From the start, she had always supported me, particularly when my in-laws disowned me and my parents refused to accept me again, leaving me feeling completely alone.

She had been my best friend and had changed my life more than I ever imagined. From learning to read and write with her to expressing my thoughts to becoming the head maid of the Suryagarh—she entrusted me with so much.

She shared her secrets, and I shared my loyalty in exchange.

But this.

I couldn't tell her this.

It would complicate everything. It meant nothing. He only did that to protect me. In his eyes, I was merely an extra, like a king's spoils of war. The only difference was that I would never expect him to check on me.

Why would he even check on me? And why the hell was I thinking about all this?

I entered the kingdom and approached Queen Nandani's chamber above the servants' quarters. The basement and first floor housed her attendees, maids, and servants, with designated rooms for each. Attendees accessed the chambers from the back rather than the front.

Upon entering her chamber, I found her resting alongside the attendees. Her eyes were closed, and she exhaled deeply, caressing her baby belly.

"How are you now, Nandani?" I asked, planting a broad smile on my face.

She opened her eyes, her face tightening with concern.

"Where have you been? I was so worried about you," she asked as I sat before her and took the bowl from the hand of an attendee to massage her swollen feet.

"You should be more concerned about your baby, Nandani," I reminded her, and she foot-nudged me, prompting me to smile instantly.

"Only my baby? Nothing yours? Don't you remember we talked about this earlier? You are my children's Maasima," she said, and I nodded, laughing a little.

Not just Maasima...

I quickly pushed those thoughts aside as she asked, "Is everything fine at your home now?"

I nodded.

"How's your mother now?" she asked, and I smiled weakly.

"Better." She knew nothing about what happened, and I didn't know the real reason before I left either. My parents sent me a letter telling me my mother was sick.

"You look upset, Suman," she pointed out. Greasing the oil on my palms, I touched her feet, shaking my head.

"No, I'm just tired from traveling," I replied, and she immediately pulled her feet back.

"You don't have to do that; just take a break," she said, and I smiled at her.

"I'm alright, Nandani. You should rest," I said.

Suddenly, she shivered and cried out in pain. "Aah," she rolled her eyes, and I chuckled softly.

"The baby kicked again?" I asked.

She nodded. "Yes, the baby is driving me crazy. He keeps kicking me even when his mother is resting, sleeping, or you-know-what—"

"Bhabhisaaaa!" Kunwarsa's excited voice cut her off. I froze, daring not to pull away, and lowered my gaze to her feet, hiding myself as if I could.

"Deversa," Nandani screamed with joy. I felt his footsteps approaching us.

"I brought you a ton of raw mangoes and the special pickle you asked for," he said, setting an enormous basket in front of her.

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Oh, my God!"

She immediately grabbed a mango from the basket, but before she could bring it closer to her mouth, I snatched it. "No,"

He glared at me, and I gulped nervously. "After washing and slicing, I'll bring you some," I said to Nandani, standing up and walking toward the kitchen.

I heard Nandani's faint laugh. My primary responsibility was to ensure her health and food quality. Ranaji wouldn't hesitate to punish me if she ate anything wrong. Reaching the royal kitchen, I asked a few attendees to bring two bowls of water, then grabbed a clean plate and knife to take to her chambers.

When I reached back, I noticed Princess Aishwarya sitting there with them, too. They were playing ludo, laughing together.

Nandani's pregnancy has been critical from the beginning, and the physicians have strongly advised her to avoid any kind of stress. However, as the Queen of a kingdom perpetually caught in wars and turmoil, she felt powerless. I sat beside her.

She looked at him and said, "I've also placed your pieces."

I shook my head with a smile, "I'm not playing."

“I’m not playing either, Bhabhisa; I have some work to attend to,” Kunwarsa said.

Nandani glanced at me, and Princess Aishwarya looked at him.

“What? You called me to play Devarsa, and now you can’t back out,” Princess Aishwarya said to him. I silently grabbed a few mangoes from the basket to wash them in the bowl.

“I’m slicing mangoes for you,” I said innocently. Nandani insisted, patting my knee, “We can wait for you.“

I shook my head. “No, no, please, go ahead; I have other things to take care of,” I said, slicing mangoes for them, glancing at him from the corner of my eye. He stared back at me.

My heart sunk into my gut.

"Aap Bina bataye kaha chale gae the? Devarsa," “Where did you go without telling us?” Princess Aishwarya asked, smiling, looking at Kunwarsa.

He rolled the dice, palming it between while replying. “Nowhere, just for a hunt,”

I passed the plate to them. Nandani takes a slice from it.

“Oh, you mean to meet a girl?” Nandani laughed at him. A smirk appeared on his face.

"Patani kya Samajh Rakha hai aap Sabne hume," “I don’t know what you all think of me,” He said, moving his piece forward.

“We can’t help it, given that you’ve turned down so many girls for this one,” Princess Aishwarya said with a soft laugh.

He bit his lower lip, a blush tinting his cheek. I couldn’t look away from the dagger beside him. He would definitely kill me someday.

I feel it to my bones, mainly how I spoke before him, and he glared at me.

After slicing the mangoes for them, I stood up to do some work. I entered her bedroom and, along with the other attendees, began smoothing her bedsheets and couches.

Serving as the head attendant to the Queen of a kingdom involves numerous responsibilities and a high level of accountability. My day typically begins with bathing and preparing for the day, often before she wakes up. However, as her due date approaches and we anticipate the baby’s arrival soon, things have become even more hectic.

After getting ready, I updated the attendees on her bath, clothing, breakfast, and everything else she would need. When quicker-than-expected results were necessary, I occasionally handled that work instead.

However, my responsibilities have increased lately because Ranaji relies solely on me for her food and belongings. Occasionally, I have to cook for her myself.

Honestly, I love it.

She never viewed me as merely an attendee. To her, I was always her best friend, so I could never overstep my boundaries or betray her trust.

However, her Devarsa had to apply the symbolic vermilion to my hair, making it difficult for me to feel at ease.

I wanted to tell her, but it would just complicate everything.

Last year, the rules regarding marriage changed, making it illegal to marry more than one woman unless proper consent is obtained from the first wife.

Ranaji was even stricter about these matters in his household. He had clearly instructed his brothers to have only one marriage. I could never ruin the life of the person who saved mine.

“Suman,” suddenly another attendee’s voice caught my attention, pulling my gaze from the bedsheet I had been blankly staring at for what felt like an eternity.

"Ji," I responded, and she knitted her brows in confusion.

“You look pale since you got back,” she said, prompting me to touch my cheek and shake my head instinctively.

“It’s just… I’m a bit tired,” I replied.

“What happened to your wrists?” she asked. I looked at my wrists, noticing the grazed marks.

“Oh!…I pulled the water out of the well a little too hard,” I lied.

“Okay, anyway, Ranisa is calling for you,” Reva informed before leaving.

Even though I had only met her at Suryagarh, she felt like a friend; she had been incredibly helpful from the start. We took turns handling responsibilities whenever we felt tired.

I arranged the dupatta over my head and walked out. They were still playing. “Yes, Nandani,”

“Suman,” she looked at me. “Ask someone to make something for Devarsa.”

I glanced at him as he looked up, then quickly shifted my gaze back to her. “Of course,” I replied.

He interrupted. “Bhabhisa, tell her not to cook for me. She cooks terribly,” I took a deep breath in frustration. Nandani chuckled softly. “No, Devarsa, you’ve only had the *khichdi* she made. She’s a splendid cook. But don’t worry; she will ask someone else to prepare something,” she replied, glancing at him, tightening my jaw.

“Then it’s fine,” he replied, stretching his arms wide as he spoke. “Ask them to bring that into my chamber,” looking at Nandani.

"Okay, Bhabhisa. I should get going. Bhaisa gave me some work," he said, looking at Nandani and Princess Aishwarya before standing up with a broad smile.

"Namak mirch thik hone chahiye hamare Bhojan me," "The salt and pepper should be right in my meal,"

I inhaled deeply and nodded. "Ji, Kunwarsa," I said, walking away. Their voices faded into the background.

As I stepped into the kitchen, I surveyed the lunch preparations and asked, "What's on the menu today?" The head cook replied, *"Dal Baati Churma, Panchratna Dal, Papad ro Saag, Ker Sangri, Gatte ro Saag."*

I inquired further, "Is it ready? Kunwar Agastya is asking for lunch," I told the head cook, who nodded in response. Yes, it's almost ready, but we don't have any servers available right now."

I looked around, noticing everyone was busy with work.

"It's alright, just take a plate; I'll handle it," I told him.

I waited until they prepared and handled it, then walked to his chamber. Upon entering, I attempted to call out, "Kunwarsa, I've brought your lunch. May I come in?" I asked, standing outside his bedroom, but there was no response.

"Kunwarsa, I brought your lunch," I called out again. Finally, he replied, "Come in." His speech was deliberate as I entered.

He was writing a letter, leaning forward over the table, so I approached him.

He furrowed his brows, gazing at me from tip to toe. ***"Humse milne ke bahane doondh rahi ho?"*** "Are you looking for reasons to meet me?" he asked as I kneeled before the table to set the plate.

"Hum kyu bahane doondenge aapse milke ke?" "Why would I do that?" I asked in response. Irritated.

"To fir Bhojan tum kyu laayi ho?" "Then why did you bring the food?" he asked, looking back at the paper.

I sighed, ***"Pehli baar laaye hai? Pehle bhi to kitni baar laaye hai na. Fir aaj aap esi baate kyu kar rahe hai?"*** "Is this the first time? I've brought you meals many times before. So, why are you saying such things?" I inquired lowly.

He finally lifted his gaze from the paper to me. I could feel the weight of his gaze. But I didn't dare to look up from the maroon fabric hanging over my chest.

It hit me!

I was still wearing the attire he gave to me. Shit! That's why he was watching me so closely back then and now.

"Paros de? Kunwarsa," "Shall I serve, Kunwarsa?" I asked, embarrassed.

A long silence followed as I calmed my racing heartbeats down, and he finished writing.

"Thik ho tum?" "Are you alright?" he asked, and I responded, smiling, ***"Hume kya hua hai?"*** "What happened to me?" I clenched my fists on my knees, waiting for his answer.

But Ranaji's voice startled me. "You're back, Agastya?"

I stood up and stepped back, looking down as he entered.

"Bhaisa," Kunwarsa chirped, getting off the couch. glancing at them from the corner of my eye.

"Where did you go without telling me?" Ranaji asked, walking to the couch.

"Nowhere. I was feeling down, so I thought I'd take a walk," he said with a faint smile, sitting beside Ranaji as he patted his shoulder.

"You shouldn't wander around like that anymore. You're about to become a man with responsibility. After your marriage, you shouldn't roam like a free bird," Ranaji said.

"Ji, Bhaisa, by the way, should I ask someone to bring your lunch here too?" he asked, and Ranaji gazed at the food and replied.

"Oh, yes, I need to talk to you about something as well,"

I left them alone after saying. "I should get your lunch, Ranaji,"

Reaching the kitchen, I asked the helpers to prepare food for Ranaji. A few attendees lined up with bowls in their hands, and I directed them to follow me.

We all reentered his chamber and watched them talk. I signaled the attendees to place the bowls on the table and asked slowly. "May I serve you, Ranaji?"

He smiled and replied, "Yes, please."

I began while he ordered the other attendees to leave. "You all can go." They bowed and left.

"Do you think they will take any action against it?" Ranaji asked Kunwarsa, and I tried not to pay attention. I was the trusted attendee, so he didn't ask me to leave.

"They will. And I think they are behind all of this."

I didn't know why, but everything felt different. I had heard them conversing a thousand times while serving food, but this felt different.

"So, do you think six months is the minimal time they'll need to lift their swords?" Ranaji asked.

"We must wait until after the wedding," Kunwarsa suggested, "because then, and only then, can we use Meharangarh's army." I felt uncertain, but I sensed they were discussing the same kingdom where he had secured his alliance.

I finished serving and filled their empty glasses with water, and Kunwarsa said, "Let's eat, Bhaisa."

Ranaji nodded and looked at me, asking, “Suman, has Ranisa eaten lunch yet?”

My heart raced slightly, and I tried to respond. “Not yet, Ranaji. She just had a plate of raw mangoes. We’ll serve her a bit later.”

He turned to Kunwarsa. “Did you bring her raw mangoes?”

He chuckled, admitting, “I wouldn’t have gone otherwise.”

Ranaji cautioned, “Limit the mangoes; otherwise, she’ll complain about pimples.”

I smiled and nodded. “Yes, Ranaji.”

They asked me to leave. I returned to the Queen’s chamber. The day unfolded routinely. I cared for her, helped her bathe in the evening, and gave her a foot massage before bed.

I felt a profound sense of peace and fulfillment; I wanted nothing more. The love I received from Nandani and the trust and importance that everyone placed in me was enough for me to dedicate my entire life to this kingdom: Suryagarh.

After that incident, life gradually returned to normal, and I resumed my daily chores. The days passed, and thankfully, I did not see Kunwarsa again. I didn’t know where he was. Nandani hadn’t given me any tasks like delivering lunch to him or supervising the attendees while they cleaned his room. Perhaps he had gone somewhere else.

He had been attending meetings and negotiations since Nandani got pregnant. Meanwhile, Prince Ranvijay, Kunwar Agastya’s older brother and Ranaji’s younger brother, was in the Kingdom overseeing construction on the outskirts, which is currently at its peak. Kunwarsa would disappear for months and sometimes leave the Kingdom without saying a word.

The last three years have transformed the Kingdom. After returning from a wedding three years ago, he has changed significantly. He may have matured, but the responsibilities have likely affected him.

What was I thinking? And why did I care?

I took a deep breath, gathered my thoughts, and returned to work.

I had spent all my time caring for Nandani. It had been two weeks since I last saw him in Nandani’s chamber. My life was getting back on track, but my thoughts wouldn’t settle. I had been having terrifying nightmares since that day. Some nights, I woke up drenched in sweat. Just moments away from consuming me and freeing my soul, the flames haunted me deeply.

The only thing that brought me comfort during those nightmares was the memory of his hand resting on my head. I rolled onto my right side beneath the comforter in my room. It was past midnight, and everyone else had already fallen asleep.

Since that day, I have habitually left the lamp lit in my room. A few fellow attendees asked me about it, but I could only say that it helps me stay alert in case Nandani needs me in the middle of the night.

With my eyes closed, I tried to drift off to sleep and push away the thoughts of that day, but it felt impossible. I pulled the comforter over my head, hoping it would protect me. However, as soon as the comforter trapped the heat, flashbacks of the blazing pyre flooded my mind.

I felt my heart slow, my cries grew louder, and people watched me with my hands bound to the wood. I couldn’t help but push the comforter away and sit up. It was getting worse.

I immediately looked at my wrists. The marks from the Jutes had faded, yet they had left me with a lasting fear for the rest of my life.

I pressed my palms against my face and tried to remind myself, ‘This is Suryagarh. You are safe here. No one is going to burn you alive. You are safe, Suman.’

I inhaled deeply and glanced at the metal jug beside my mattress. Leaning forward, I picked it up, but let out a frustrated sigh when I realized it was empty.

I stood up and walked out of my room towards the kitchen. It was well past midnight, and I couldn’t understand why the morning light felt scarier to me than the darkness of the night.

Maybe, in the darkness, I could hide from the light.

Without taking a lamp, I entered the kitchen to fill the jug and noticed a few attendees still awake. “Why are you awake?” I asked one of them, who was lighting the stove before looking at me.

“Prince Agastya has returned. He’s asking for something to eat,” she informed, and I lowered my gaze for a moment.

“Oh,” I nodded, looking at her and the other attendees, chopping vegetables, crushing dried chilies, and boiling milk. I gulped as I watched them and placed the jug in the corner, saying, “Let me…” The attendees glanced at me and frowned.

“You should get some rest. Ranisa will want you bright and early tomorrow morning,” she said, making me smile and shake my head.

“I can’t sleep,” I insisted, sitting down and grabbing another knife to chop vegetables. After slicing and assisting the

attendees with the cooking, I glanced at the bowls filled with four vegetable curries, two sweets, and chapatis and frowned slightly.

"He doesn't like beans." I pointed to a bowl, and the attendee turned to me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot," she said, lifting the bowl off the plate and looking at me with a confused expression.

"Onion," I reminded. She set a bowl of diced raw onions before lifting the plate in her hand. I watched her walk away with the plate.

Taking a deep breath, I immediately stood up to follow her.

"Listen," I called.

She glanced back at me, and I nervously swallowed as I looked at the plate. "You should rest. I'll take it to him," I offered, extending my hands. She stared at me momentarily before leaving the plate without a word.

I smiled and said, "You look tired."

She smiled back and walked away quietly.

My heart raced faster with every step I took toward his chamber at night. The moon shone in the sky, and stars scattered like a blanket. The chilly winds made me shiver before I entered.

Illuminated softly with a few lamps, the chamber glowed, and as I breathed deeply before going forward, I saw the light streaming from his bedroom.

I bit my lower lip as I entered the bedroom and glanced at the couch, expecting to find him sitting there. He wasn't.

I quickly scanned the bedroom, but he was nowhere to be seen.

Feeling anxious, I called out, "Kunwarsa." My voice came out slow and slightly shaky, as it was my first time entering his chamber past midnight. It was painfully silent.

I noticed a soldier outside his bedroom, who informed me, "He's in the resting area."

I nodded, and he walked away. He must have come to inform me.

As I approached the resting area, I noticed him near a pile of burning wood at the end of the gallery. The surrounding darkness intensified my fear as I moved closer. He was facing away from me, looking out at the open garden. The clattering of metal made my brows furrow in confusion.

Quietly stepping forward, I noticed him sitting with a large bowl of dark powder. His hands were smeared with the gray substance. A heavy iron mortar rested beside him, and his expression appeared serious from this angle. I focused intently on his eyes, observing the powder between his fingers and faintly catching its scent, bringing it closer to his nose.

The confusion was evident; he bit his lower lip as his hand instinctively brushed against the dagger at his side.

My heart raced as I watched him pull the knife from its golden sheath, beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. Holding the knife, he scraped a small amount of powder onto the blade's tip and leaned closer to the fire.

He placed the blade into the flames, and suddenly, a bright spark erupted from the powder. For a moment, the fire transformed into shades of blue and dark orange.

I shivered to death.

But a smile spread across his face as he exhaled.

Suddenly, he looked at me.

Fear washed over me, and I stammered, "Um, di…dinner." Lowering my gaze. I took uncertain steps forward, kneeling to place the plate before him.

I could feel his intense gaze on me.

"Soyi nahi ho ab tak?" "Haven't you slept yet?" he asked dryly, washing his hands in a nearby bowl and pushing aside the items he had used to reach for the plate.

I gulped nervously, lowering my eyes. ***"Neend nahi aa rahi thi."*** "I couldn't sleep." He wiped his hands with a cloth, and my heart skipped a beat when I noticed the small cracks in his fingertips, stained with gray powder that had now turned black.

"Kyu? Ullu ho?" "Why? Are you an owl?" he spat, catching my attention to his face, making me grit my teeth and take a deep breath.

"Aap bhi to jaagre hain, aap ullu hai?" "You're awake, too—are you an owl?" I couldn't help but respond.

He brought the plate closer, tearing off a tiny piece of chapati and setting it on the side of the plate.

"Hum to aur bhi bhot kuch karte hain... Tum karogi?" "I do plenty of other things, too… will you do that as well?" he asked neutrally, his face showing no emotion as he took a bite and then glanced at me.

I lowered my gaze and gently shook my head as I poured water into his glass. The silence lingered as I sat across from him, my hands resting in my lap and my eyes directed downward as he ate quietly. I didn't fully understand why I was here, but it felt comforting to be around him.

"Pareshaan ho?" "Are you worried?" he asked slowly. I raised my gaze to see him licking his fingers, then nodded.

He slightly nodded and spoke calmly, "Go to bed…nothing will happen."

I lowered my gaze, feeling a gentle wave of comfort wash over me with his words. I didn't get up; I couldn't. His soothing presence while he ate silently sent the waves of comfort I hadn't felt in ages.

He didn't ask me to leave again and continued concentrating on finishing his dinner.

I watched him clean his fingers in the bowl, then pull the plate toward me as I stood up with it in my hands. I glanced at him briefly before turning around, but, he called, "Suno," "Hey,"

I halted and turned to see him placing small stones into the mortar, his unwavering focus clear.

"Ji," I responded slowly. He went on, ***"Bhojan mat banaya karo."*** "Don't cook."

I blinked in silence, yearning to ask, "Why?"

He lifted his lazy gaze and replied flatly, ***"Dar jaogi,"*** "You will get scared."

I gulped at his words and lowered my gaze. ***"Jinke sir par saye nahi hua karte vo dar se darke nahi reh sakte, kunwarsa,"*** "Those who don't have shadows over their head can't afford to be scared of fear, Kunwarsa," I said, watching him take a deep breath and nod as he stood up.

He was tall and well-built, and his dark-dusted outfit suited him perfectly. Approaching slowly and silently, he stopped two feet from me.

He swallowed quietly and gently touched my head over my *dupatta*, caressing it slowly while whispering, ***"Kuch nahi hoga… hum hai,"*** "Nothing will happen… I'm here." His words suddenly felt heavy in my heart. I blinked and stepped back from him, and tears filled my eyes.

"Good night, Kunwarsa," I wished, and he nodded before returning to work. After returning the plates to the kitchen, I fell asleep in my room.

He was in the Kingdom now, and I could peacefully fall asleep.

The next few days were similar, but unlike during his absence, we had several encounters since he was in the kingdom. Sometimes, we bumped into each other in Nandani and Ranaji's chamber; other times, we took leisurely strolls. As always, we pretended not to recognize each other outside our roles as prince and servant.

A week later, after cleaning her bedroom on an ordinary day, I returned to Nandani's resting area. Soft peals of laughter came from the garden side.

Curious, I walked over and noticed them chatting and laughing. Leaning against a pile of pillows, Nandani gently caressed her swollen belly while talking with Princess Aishwarya, Prince Ranvijay, and Kunwarsa.

As I stepped closer, I saw him lying on his back, his head perched on Prince Ranvijay's lap.

"And, Bhabhisa, do you remember when we tried to sneak out of the kingdom?" Kunwarsa said, and laughter erupted. Prince Ranvijay joined in, too.

"What is this? When did that happen?" Princess Aishwarya asked as I smiled, watching them laugh attentively at him while he spoke. "Choti Bhabhisa, Bhabhisa was planning to go outside the Kingdom. She was sure that Bhaisa wouldn't let her, so she came to me, and we made a deal to sneak out of the Kingdom," he chuckled softly.

"And did you do what he asked in return, Aishwarya?" Nandani asked, looking at Princess Aishwarya, who replied with amusement, "What? What did he ask for in return?"

Nandani spoke with animated gestures, her eyes sparkling with joy. "He asked me to make someone jealous in return,"

Princess Aishwarya's eyes widened. "You mean a girl?"

Nandani nodded and laughed. He playfully palmed his face and shook his head. "Noooo, no, no, that wasn't real, Bhabhisa."

A smile spread across my lips.

"Devarsa, you're quite a different man. I mean, how many girls?" Princess Aishwarya teased, and he just laughed.

"Ayyeee, don't mess with him like that, Aishwarya," Prince Ranvijay said, and they all laughed again.

"Does Ranaji know about all this?" Princess Aishwarya asked, glancing at Nandani and Prince Ranvijay while Nandani shook her head.

"It's nothing serious," Prince Ranvijay said. "He just jokes around," Nandani added. "He's full of secrets, Aishwarya."

They chuckled softly, and he laughed, glancing up at Princess Aishwarya.

A shiver ran through me when he gazed at me standing there. My smile shrunk, and I lowered my gaze.

"Nothing was serious, Bhabhisa. " His voice was now serious, and laughter was long gone. "I was just trying to see how popular I was with girls."

"Suman," I suddenly heard Nandani's voice and looked in her direction.

His gaze was watching me, piercing me to my bones.

"Hnn?" I walked closer to her as Princess Aishwarya asked, "Alright, so what's your biggest secret, Devarsa?" She inquired. He looked at her before looking back at me.

“I already have a wife,” he chuckled at the end, and everyone laughed.

I sat frozen, goosebumps crawling over my skin and a knot tightening in my stomach. Glancing at Nandani, who was laughing and looking at me, I quickly forced a smile as best as I could.

"Hahahahaaaa, Suman, can you ask someone to warm up the water?” Nandani asked, and I nodded. "Yes,"

I looked at Prince Ranvijay, gently patting his cheek. “Don’t say things like that. You’re getting married in five months. Be loyal to your future wife.”

He chuckled softly and nodded. “I am, Bhaisa, I really am.”

“Awwww, he loves her so much already,” Nandani commented. I stood up and heard him say.

“Let the talks of love gather dust on the shelves, Bhabhisa,” his smile weakened.

I looked at him again, momentarily lifting my gaze to meet his eyes. He looked at me.

“Why is that?” Princess Aishwarya asked, and he lowered his gaze.

"Vo hamara pyaar jhel nahi paegi Bhabhisa," “She wouldn’t be able to handle my love, Bhabhisa.” He said.

Then, Prince Ranvijay inquired, “Why not? You’ll need to give her a chance.”

He shook his head and smiled. “I’m done giving chances, Bhaisa,” he said.

“You know that.” Princess Aishwarya ran her fingers through his hair and replied, “She will make you fall in love with her. I’m sure of it.”

He smiled, glanced at her, took a deep breath, and, before glancing at me, replied, “I’m loyal, Bhabhisa.”

Everyone appeared confused. I quickly lowered my gaze and turned to walk away from there.

Was he talking about me?

“By the way, when are you leaving for Mehrangarh?” I suddenly heard Nandani ask, and I turned to look at him.

What? Was he leaving? Again.

Why?

He replied, “This evening.” She then asked, “Should I have someone pack some food for the trip?”

He answered, “Yes,” and Nandani called out again. “Suman,”

I looked at her, and she smiled at me. “Can you pack something for Devarsa?”

I nodded silently. He blurted out, “Only fruits, Bhabhisa, nothing else.”

I looked at him, and Nandani reiterated, “Only fruits.”

I nodded, walking away from there.

With every step I took away from her, I reminded myself that she needed to confront her fears. It wasn't my job to make her feel at ease.

Everything I did was meant to protect her, and I would always look after her as…a Prince.

But her eyes appeared hopeless and empty, and her smile seemed locked away somewhere. The pallor of her skin hadn't faded since that day, and it was all turning into a nightmare for me.

It made me uneasy. I didn't want to look at her and feel that I could do something, but I didn't.

Reaching my chamber, I noticed the two female attendees packing the requested items. "Is everything ready?" I asked.

"Yes, Kunwar Agastya," one of them replied.

I nodded in response and walked straight into the bathroom for a quick bath. However, my mind lingered on the night she brought me food. Her face appeared scared; she looked exhausted yet afraid of sleep.

I understood she wouldn't quickly get over that day—her past. Even though I was unaware of the specifics of her suffering, I could see irreparable things in her eyes.

But I wanted her to forget all that. It wouldn't happen again.

And I didn't know why it was bothering me.

She sat quietly before me, her eyes downcast, and I sensed she wanted to stay in my presence. And I didn't know how to console her; it wasn't my place.

Knowing I couldn't keep that flame alive, I didn't want to spark that in her in the first place.

Or we both would burn.

After taking off my clothes, I slid into the pool, resting my head against the wall with my eyes closed.

Her haunting words about fear, 'Those who don't have shadows over their head can't afford to be scared of fear, Kunwarsa.' had lingered with me since that day.

Her pain ran deep, and now another layer of terror had been added: fire. She feared fire. She sat before me while I ate, never lifting her gaze to the flames just a few feet away. Perhaps she sought some comforting words or simply wanted to be near me. Either way, she shouldn't have come.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes, once again realizing I had been lost in thoughts of her when I shouldn't have been.

She wasn't my wife. She wasn't… my wife. She was not my anything—just a responsibility.

Maybe, More than responsibility.

I gulped, clenched my teeth, and tried to forget that day, focusing on other things. But one thing gnawed at me deeply: the suffering of the women who had experienced that ritual. I didn't know what motivated me to protect her, but at that moment, I felt I would lose someone who had contributed so much to my life.

I observed her smiling and laughing with Bhabhisa while diligently working each day to fulfill her responsibilities.

She didn't deserve to die like that. Nobody did.

My heart raced. I couldn't even imagine what the future would be like without her. In that moment, her pain was so overwhelming that I forgot everything and did what needed to be done. I had no idea how much trauma she endured.

There I was, plagued by nightmares of that day, utterly oblivious to what she was experiencing.

"Kunwar Agastya," a voice from the audience interrupted my thoughts, and I turned to face him. "Hmm?"

"Commander Eklavya came to see you." I nodded before he left.

I rushed to finish my bath, concentrating on the critical matters ahead. After getting ready, I stepped out and noticed Eklavya waiting for me in the meeting area.

"Kunwar Agastya," he said, standing up with a bow as I approached him.

"Is everything ready?" I inquired, and he nodded. I mentally reviewed my checklist.

The gifts, the soldiers, and Eklavya.

"Did you test it?" he asked, and I nodded slightly.

"It's working, but I'm not sure exactly how we can use it," I admitted, and he furrowed his brow before speaking after a brief pause.

"Several people have observed the commander of Mehrangarh in the brothels. Perhaps we should place some spies there. He knows what's happening, and I think they may also know how to exploit it." He suggested, and I nodded, considering his words.

"Then we should focus on extracting yellow crystals from Songarh," I suggested, and he agreed.

"There's only one issue: we need to appoint someone trustworthy in Mehrangarh to monitor them," he said, and I smiled slightly.

"That's why I'm taking you there," I said, wrapping my arm around his shoulder as we walked toward the kingdom's main door.

"What do you mean?" he asked, confused, and I explained. "I've asked Rudra Bhaisa to assign you as my fiancé's bodyguard so you can watch over the kingdom."

He arched his eyebrows. “Why would they agree to that?”

Smiling, I replied, “Because I care about my future wife,”

He smirked a bit. “Caring? Really?” he teased, and I playfully punched his abs.

“Agastya,” Rudra Bhaisa’s voice caught my attention, pulling my gaze from Eklavya to him. He walked to us.

“All set?” he asked, resting his hand on my shoulder, and I nodded.

“Yes, I’m excited to go to the Ganguar festival,” I lied. He smiled before turning to Eklavya.

“And you, the gift?” he asked. Eklavya smiled and nodded. “Yes, Ranaji, all set.”

“Remember, no blunders, no fights, no actions—just information,” he reminded us. He was aware of our concerns about a war approaching our doorstep. Eklavya and I shared a quick glance before nodding in acknowledgment.

"Yes, Bhaisa,"

"Yes, Ranaji,"

He inhaled deeply, looking at both of us. "If anything happens to any of you. I will make you both alive and kill you with my own hands," He threatened with love, and I nodded silently.

“Come here,” he hugged both of us and patted the back of my neck. “All the best! And Agastya, also try to spend some time with your would-be wife,” he said, and I inhaled deeply.

“What will I do after the wedding, then? There’s plenty of time to enjoy,” I said, and he gave me a dissatisfied look, which made me smile. “Fine… I will,”

He nodded, and I looked at the attendees, taking the needful things to the convoy waiting at the main entrance of the Kingdom.

“We should leave now,” I said, and we both walked toward our horses’ stable to begin our journey to Mehrangarh. Rudra Bhaisa saw us off.

The journey was long, as Mehrangarh was a kingdom near the Him Ranges, but just a few miles from the east-northern border of Hind.

It took us a whole day to get there. Since we weren’t traveling with any women, we didn’t put up any tents and spent the night under the trees.

When we entered the Kingdom of Mehrangarh, the sun was shining brightly. Seeing everyone waiting for us at the door, I felt a twinge of guilt because so much had changed since my last visit.

At my special request, I arranged my marriage alliance with the Princess of Mehrangarh through Rudra Bhaisa. Everyone, except for Rudra Bhaisa, thought that I loved the Princess, so I decided to marry her.

But the reality was completely different, even beyond Rudra Bhaisa’s imagination.

I told him I would keep an eye on the borders with Mehrangarh’s help, but little did he know it was nothing closer to my plans.

“*Pranam Rajasa*,” I smiled, joining my hands as I looked at the old King of Mehrangarh welcoming us. “***Kunwar Agastya,”*** he said, embracing me in a loose hug and patting my shoulder. “How was your journey?” he inquired, and I tried to put a wide smile on my face as I responded.

“It was fantastic. I really missed you and your hospitality,” I attempted to smile, and he chuckled softly.

“We’re glad you’re here; come on in,” he said, welcoming me into the vast Kingdom of Mehrangarh. The thick red brick walls of Mehrangarh contrasted with the main palaces, which were made of white imported marble.

Mehrangarh was a kingdom renowned for its remarkable connections to the outside world. There were rumors, possibly truths, that individuals from other continents had visited. They also possessed trade secrets.

And I was looking for one of them.

Actually, Two.

“How’s everything going?” I asked politely, and he smiled while placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Everything is good, and Princess is maturing faster,” he replied while I made an effort to remain calm despite his words.

Well, Princess Mehrangarh was the youngest of Mehrangarh’s seven older sisters and two brothers, all of whom were already married and well settled. However, her disinterest in marriage had worried the King. He believed she hadn’t matured with mind.

“That’s good to hear,” I said, and he suggested, “You should meet her. We’ll arrange for your lunch in her meeting area.” I nodded and spent some time with them before heading off to her chamber.

The princess and I got along well as future husband and wife. We were friends. As I passed through the galleries, I observed the soldiers standing outside her chamber.

"I wish to see her," I exclaimed, and they opened the door for me.

I stepped inside and noticed the silence in her chamber. As I walked past the large compound, I entered the meeting area. The beautiful decorations caught my eye, and I saw her sitting on the couch, waiting for me.

“Rashmika,” I called, and she lifted her head to look at me.

“Agastya!” she squealed, getting up from her couch and running toward me. “I was waiting for you for so long,”

I glanced around at her attendees watching us. She noticed my gaze and turned to look at them.

"Um, bring something for him to eat," she said. I watched some of her attendees leave, but not all of them.

"Can you leave us alone?" I asked, looking at the male soldiers on duty.

They walked out, leaving us alone, and I glanced at Rashmika, who was looking at me with an adorable expression.

I smiled, moving my hand back to take out the letter. Her lips widened into a smile, and she reached out her hand to take it.

I immediately pulled my hand back.

“Ayeeee, please. I’m dying for this!” she pleaded, her sweet voice bringing an ear-to-ear smile to my face. I handed her the letter.

As she sat on the couch to read it, her eyes brimmed with tears that streamed down her cheeks. A wide smile lingered on her lips.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, and she looked at me, smiling and nodding. “Yes, yes!”

I smiled back, sitting beside her.

She finished the letter, rolled it, and pulled it to her heart before asking, “How are you?” Her voice made me lower my gaze, and I intertwined my fingers and shook my head.

“Something happened,” I stated, and she took my hand in hers and questioned me. "What?" I lifted my gaze to meet hers.

“Since you’re going to be my wife, I think you should know that…” I gulped nervously.

“What?”

“Um, three weeks ago, I found out that one of our attendees was taken captive for self-demolition following her husband’s death,”

“Oh,” she said with wide eyes.

“You saved her, right?” she asked, and I nodded again. "I did, but... to protect her, I had to pretend... that I am marrying her and...,"

“Ohhh,” she looked at me with widened even more.

“You married her?” she asked, and I opened my mouth to explain.

“Not entirely… I mean, I applied my blood... in the parting of her hair so her people wouldn’t burn her alive, giving her a chance to live,” she stared at me in shock, and I waited blankly for her response.

She shifted her gaze from me, gulping nervously. “You know... none of our kingdoms can find out about this,”

I nodded and palmed my face. “I really didn’t have an option, Rashmika. Nothing else came to mind,” I tried to explain.

“So, that means I am going to be your second wife…?” she asked, and I bit my lips nervously and confusedly.

“Our alliance was arranged first, but the ritual happened with her first... I don’t know who is first and who is second,” I said, and she chuckled.

I chuckled after her.

“Wow, you are lucky. You’re going to have two people in your life,” she said, giving me a side-eye.

"And not someone real," I added, looking down with a deep inhale, remembering how my life would be until I die in some war or battle. Empty.

She smiled at me and caressed my hand.

“I hope you’re not angry about it,” I asked, and she shook her head.

“I’m glad you saved her. How is she doing? Is she alright after that?” she asked, and I clicked my tongue and shook my head. “Not really. I think she’s having nightmares, and she’s not smiling like she used to," I said, and she immediately responded, "Ohhhhhhh, smiling? You’re noticing her?" She teased, and I shook my head.

“I don’t have to pay attention to her. She’s always around. She’s close to Bhabhisa. I’ve seen her for the past four years, standing next to her. They’re good friends,” I added, and she rested her head on my shoulder.

“You need to look after her,” she said, and I shook my head.

“I can’t. Everything will go wrong. I can’t ruin us,” I said, and she smiled at me. “You know we can’t be ruined,”

I chuckled and nodded.

"Yes, I know that," I smiled.

When the door opened, I saw the attendees walking in with lunch plates. They set the lunch before us, and I turned to her.

“I’m starving,” I said, and she looked at me, slightly furrowing her brows.

“So, what's her name?” A subtle smile that I didn’t understand appeared on my face.

“I wouldn’t know.” I tried to explain, “I never asked,” but she looked at me in disbelief.

“Didn’t you hear anyone call her name?” she asked, and I frowned.

“Where’s the jealousy? Act like you’re going to be my wife,” I teased, and she chuckled, nudging me. “You wish.”

I laughed a little, focusing on my lunch.

After meeting Rashmika, I left the Mehrangarh Castle with Eklavya. We climbed the mountain to see what was happening on the other side.

"I don't understand how we will get the black stone for the same powder?" Eklavya asked as I pushed aside the tall, wild grass to take another step forward.

"The soil of Mehrangarh has black stones underneath, and they have been exporting that for many years with no one's knowledge. How did a small princely state become so wealthy under the same king's rule in five decades, especially without support?" I explained.

The forest was dense, and we both wanted to get through it before sunset; otherwise, we wouldn't make it back.

"I believe they're hiding something important," Eklavya said, and I looked at him.

"Not just one thing, but many. They are exploiting the mountain ranges, and Mehrangarh is the kingdom from where people hear that something is wrong with the borders and that someone is trying to attack us," I said.

He lowered his gaze for a moment before saying, "That could mean two things: either they are completely right, or they are using this to distract attention from themselves," he said, and I nodded.

"Yes, I believe there may also be a third possibility."

"What?" he asked.

I took a deep breath, moving the grass aside and climbing higher up the mountain. "Mehrangarh has allied with them and is reinforcing their position. If any attack occurs, it will probably be closest to the enemies. This could endanger all the northern Hind. They haven't always been this friendly toward us," I said. He immediately replied, "We should inform Ranaji about this."

I quickly whiffed. "No, we can't. Ranisa is pregnant, and we're still recovering from our year-old debts and destruction. He would want to handle the situation with war, which would put everything at stake. Once there's a slight rift between us, Mehrangarh will become alert. They should think we're foolish about everything," I explained.

"But how can we, just the two of us, stop it?" he asked, and I smiled at him. "Just wait and see."

The sun's rays struck our eyes as we continued climbing and discussing everything. It took us a long time, and the sun was nearly down to the horizon when we finally sat at the peak of the tall mountain. I extended my hand, and Eklavya handed me the glasses that allowed me to see objects clearly, even from a distance.

Because of the changing weather, my breathing had become heavier, so I stretched the long tube with the lens to my eyes, keeping one closed. Everything blurred momentarily, and then I focused on the translucent image of black tents spread over acres of land. My heart raced, and I looked at Eklavya.

I quickly placed the lens back in front of my eyes, and the view swept the mountain beneath my feet. "Fuck! Motherfuckers!" The curses slipped out unintentionally, and I heard Eklavya ask, "What happened? Is everything alright?" I glanced at him and handed him the golden object.

He held it up to his eyes.

"It's huge," he remarked, and I nodded. "Not just huge, but really close to us," I said, noticing his face pale. "We have little time. We should tell Ranaji about this," he insisted, but I shook my head. "No, he will be a father in a few days. I can't do that," I said, returning the object and looking again. The tents were enormous, and something caught my eye.

"I don't understand one thing. There are three powerful kingdoms in southern Hind and many princely states, all linked by Bhaisa and King Abhinandan's efforts over the last three years. We have over two hundred thousand soldiers and resources, while they only have about fifty thousand. They will wear out from all this traveling, and our soldiers will be ready to take their hearts out. Why are they even trying?" I said, and suddenly Eklavya chimed in, "Or maybe there's a bigger picture we're missing."

I lowered the lens and looked at him. "Like Mehrangarh as their ally?" I shook my head slowly. "Mehrangarh is rich in wealth, but they lack powerful leaders. Soldiers don't kill kings; kings kill kings," I asserted, and we both stared at each other in contemplation.

Suddenly, something struck me.

"Explosives." My heart raced, and I stared at him in disbelief. "Eklavya, Mehrangarh is going to help that army with that powder. That's why they have piles of that black and yellow stone and soil; the powder burns differently. It creates sparks and turns flames blue and dark orange," I explained, and he furrowed his brow.

"But how can that spark kill someone? I mean, how is it different from real fire?" he asked, and I shook my head. "That's the one thing I don't know. We need to figure out what they are making and how. Otherwise, we're done for," I replied, and he nodded.

“But right now, we should head back. It’s getting dark,” he said. I glanced at the sky, which was slowly turning a deeper shade of dark blue, adorned with layers of twinkling stars. “We won’t make it in time. It’s far,” I replied, as he touched my shoulder. “There’s a temple nearby. We should wait there,” he suggested, and we both began walking down the mountain. The trees surrounded us; it was dark, and the scent of wet soil filled the air. The sounds of insects and lurking predators echoed not far away.

“There,” Eklavya said, and I looked at the small cave carved into the mountain. We both quickened our pace toward it. By the time we entered the cave, it had grown intensely dark.

Thankfully, fire torches illuminated the space, and we inhaled deeply, trying to fight the dropping temperature as we walked deeper inside.

A priest sat with long, dried locks of hair cascading to the floor. He faced away from us, and I watched him chant prayers to the *Shivlinga*.

“Pranam, pandit ji,” I intoned, joining my hands and lowering myself to sit behind him alongside Eklavya, bending our heads to touch our foreheads to the ground in the holy embrace of *Mahadev*.

Silence lingered until he completed his chant and slowly turned to us. While his face may not have been friendly, his aura was comforting. I could feel the depth of his spirituality and devotion.

"Rah bhatak gaye ho," “Lost your way,” he said, and I gulped nervously as I struggled to respond. “Um, no, but it’s dark now, so we are searching for a place to spend the night,”

He shook his head and looked at me with an intense gaze.

“Nahi, tum jeevan ki rah bhatak gaye ho,” “No, you have lost your way of life,” he said, and I felt a slight shiver run down my spine.

I tried to ask, "What do you mean?"

He blinked silently for a moment before replying, “Stop running.” I blinked, confused, waiting for his next word. “Stop running from your past; it’s haunting your future,” he said, and I shook my head slowly, lowering my gaze. Now, I understood what he was implying.

“I can’t. The fear has occupied so much space within me that nothing else can coexist,” I replied, and he chuckled.

“Redo the calculations, child.” His words didn’t quite make sense to me. But I nodded.

I didn’t understand why; the memory of her sitting before me that night flashed through my mind. Silent. Hopeless. Scared. Then came the memory of her tied to that pyre, on the verge of being burned.

"*Panditji*," I called, gazing at him as he raised his eyes to meet mine—a faint smile on his lips.

“I want to ask you something,” I said, speaking low, and he nodded. “A few weeks ago, I did…” I shared everything that happened with her, and his smile grew unexpectedly. “And now she’s scared. She’s having nightmares. Can you help me with something? Like a mantra or anything?” I asked, and he extended his hand. I looked at his palm in confusion.

“Your hand,” he said.

I shifted closer and offered it. He touched my wrist and untied the thick black thread I wore. I did not know how long it had been there. Every year on *Shivratri*, my Bhaisa would replace it with a new one. He told me my mother tied it around my wrist when I was born. Everyone believes it protects me from harm because when my mother died, I fell weak and struggled to survive. That was another reason my brothers loved me to the moon.

He untied the thread and held it in his hand, chanting some prayers before placing it back in my palm. "Tie it around her left arm. It should remain covered," he instructed, and I nodded. "Okay,"

I looked at Eklavya, sitting in disbelief.

Rolling my eyes at him, I looked back at *Pandit Ji*. “You both can rest there,” he said, pointing toward the inner part of the cave. We both touched his feet before walking away to sit in the corner.

“You could’ve asked if we would win or not, but no, you asked how to get rid of her nightmares. Seriously?” Eklavya said, giving me an intense look.

The jealousy was visible on his face.

“Winning or losing depends on our actions, and she needs help,” I replied, and he mimicked me. “She needs help.”

I immediately kicked him in the leg, causing him to fall to the floor. “Ahh, I need to rest,” he groaned, and I lay down on the floor as well, keeping the thread-safe in my possession.

We both woke up and received *Panditji’s* blessings before starting our journey again.

On our way back to Mehrangarh, I realized I had done something foolish.

“Ugh, yesterday was the Ganguar festival. We had to be back on time,” I said, looking at Eklavya with irritation. He glanced at me. “What? I’m not getting married,” he replied.

I inhaled deeply and said, “But you could have reminded me. Bhaisa will kill me if he ever finds out,” he smiled and replied.

“Then keep it to yourself. He will not find out about this huge thing either.” I landed another punch on his back, causing him to growl in pain. “You should stop punching me,” he stated, and I chuckled.

After returning to Mehrangarh, I tried explaining to everyone that I had visited a temple and was late. I felt sorry, but they shot me a hundred different glares. Rashmika’s father was especially unhappy.

After meeting Rashmika one more time, I left Mehrangarh. I returned to Suryagarh, leaving Eklavya as Rashmika’s bodyguard.

When I arrived, it was past midnight. I went straight into my chamber without making too much noise.

"Welcome back, Kunwarsa," an attendant greeted me, and I nodded.

"Thank you," I replied, undoing my overcoat and shoes and finally breathing.

Home is home.

Sitting on the couch, I closed my eyes. My mind and heart still couldn’t accept what I had witnessed.

Everything was at stake, not just one kingdom but all the northern Indira. I exhaled deeply and heard the attendant ask, "Shall we bring your dinner?" I nodded, and she left.

I quickly took a bath and changed into a loose, long loincloth. I needed to devise a plan, so I searched the library for the latest map we had for Indira. After clearing the table of everything, I spread out the map.

I needed to think. I had to act. My eyes searched for the locations that would be the least populated in the coming months. My mind raced to determine where Mehrangarh could conceal it—and what, exactly?

Suddenly, I heard someone clear her throat. I glanced at her momentarily as she stood at the library’s door, her fingers nervously intertwined.

She wore dark green attire and a *dupatta* on her head, either end falling on the sides and tucked on the side of her waist. Her braid forward, snaking along her curves.

I gulped, unable to let aside the moment she fisted her hands on my chest, pulling me closer like she owned me. Her every breath remained imprinted on my mind. I had never heard anyone’s heartbeats so clearly before.

“Your dinner.” She pulled me out of my thoughts, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Not in the mood today,” I replied, and she frowned in confusion.

“But you asked for dinner,” she said innocently, and I looked at her, nodding. “Yes, I asked for dinner, not *dinner*.” My gaze could not stop watching her tip-to-toe.

She inhaled deeply, shrinking, and I could see the tension and confusion on her face. The library’s lighting was dim, casting a soft glow from the fire torches and oil lamp onto her face. She was beautiful, but her gaze was confused as she blinked at me, standing silently.

I broke the eye contact, mentally shaking my head to stop soaking in her face.

"Your dinner—not *dinner*—is waiting outside," she said. A smirk lingered on my face.

Wild.

She had never talked to me like that before. We had been around each other but never conversed like this. There was a palpable tension between us.

For example, I was half naked, and she wasn’t moving her gaze away.

I walked around the table, leaning against it and crossing my arms.

"Have you been fired from your position as a head maid by Bhabhisa?" I asked, her gaze shifting to confusion. I was aware of her nervousness.

Shaking her head, she replied, "No, why?"

I lowered my gaze and stepped closer. Slowly.

"Why are you awake this late? You should be resting. You shouldn’t be here," I pointed, and she tilted her head slightly to meet my eyes as I stood before her.

“I understand. However, I must handle all of Nandani’s responsibilities as the Queen. Since she is busy being pregnant, I need to manage everything. You’re her family, and as your sister-in-law and queen, she should look after your meals, but she is pregnant. Fortunately,” she blabbered, and I nodded, absorbing her words.

"But you could have sent someone else with the dinner," I reminded her.
She lowered her gaze, and her beetroot pink lips fell silent.
"Are you trying to accuse me of something?" she asked, lifting her bold gaze to meet mine, and a smile appeared on my face.
"Like what?" I countered.
She rolled her eyes and fell silent, stepping back and shaking her head.
"I should go," she said, taking a few steps away.
I immediately called out, "*Suno," "*Hey,"
She turned back, her striking eyes flashing with anger. "Ji," her voice showed how badly she was affected.
"Come here," I said, but she shook her head. "I will send someone else," and said before walking out of the library.

Suman

I walked out of the library. His words built strange knots in my stomach. The hair on my arms stood straight in shock, and suddenly, I felt my hand being held by a warm, rough, and mighty hand.

He pulled me back into the library. My eyes widened in shock, my breath faltered, and my heartbeats raced.

“Don’t do it ever again,” he said, shaking his head. His gaze was intense and angry, raising the temperature between us.

I bit the inside of my lips in fear, struggling to ask a question.

“What?” I stuttered, dragging my hand from his deadly grip and stepping back as my eyes betrayed my mind, fixating on his neck. A thick mole, slightly to the right of the center of his neck, held my sight.

He pulled me back. I quickly looked away, bumping my shoulder into his warm, bare chest.

Butterflies erupted in my stomach, and his words, coated in a deep and low voice, “That I am sending another attendee,” twisted my gut.

I blinked nervously. The words hung in my throat as I tried to say. “I did not mean—“

“Do act smart,” he cut me off. His voice had never affected me like this.

"I am sorry," I quickly replied. My voice came out shaky.

I tried to step away from him, but he held my wrist again—gentler this time. The bangles tingled in my wrists as he took his fingers back. I lifted my gaze, staring into his eyes and attentively at my hand.

My throat ran dry. I felt his palm curl around my forearm and glide until it reached my elbow.

A shiver ran through my body when I felt him slip his finger into the hem of my blouse’s sleeve. "Wh...what are you doing?" I fumbled, stepping away, but he hushed me down. “Shhhhh,”

A wave of fright rushed through my body, and I stood frozen under his light grip. As he pulled the half-sleeve of my blouse up to the quarter, he gently brushed his thumb along my arm—slowly yet captivatingly.

“I met a priest, and he suggested I…” he said, taking a few steps away before returning to me with a black thread.

I gulped nervously when he encircled the thread around my left arm thrice while saying. “It will help you with the nightmares and fears.”

I shook my head. “I don’t believe any of this.”

He gazed into my eyes, scanning me to the folds of my former existence, and tied it securely so it would never come off. "You do not believe in God?" He intoned, and I shook my head.

"Why?" He questioned.

“Because he did nothing great in my life for which he could take credit for,” I replied, and he smirked at the end.

“You’re standing here alive in before me. Do you think that happened without God’s help?” he asked, and I shook my head.

No.

If he wanted me alive, he wouldn’t have let me go there in the first place.

After a long pause of silence, I asked, “If you believe in God, why are you afraid to give love another chance?” He lifted his intense gaze and stared sharply into my eyes.

It stripped me bare, leaving me weak in the knees.

But there was a magnetic force that kept me comfortable in his presence, and I couldn’t stop gazing back at those dark green eyes. His eyebrows were mediocrely thick, his lashes were long. I could feel our breathing shallow.

"You might know that love is not a bed of roses," He drawled, his gaze lowering at my lips. It made me feel even weaker. *Attracted.* Maybe.

“Only adjusting you around the waist is certainly not love. So I wouldn’t know,” I murmured, feeling his grip tighten around my arm and his expression harden.

“Then you shouldn’t speak of it,” he spat, and I lowered my gaze to his lips, moving as words flowed out in his deep voice. The voice, a source of both madness and safety in my nightmares, had preserved me amidst the surrounding inferno. The voice that now spun my world around a different axis.

Hi voice.

“I’m just trying to shift your perspective. I can’t say for certain, but marriage can be a nightmare without love… I’m speaking from experience,” I tried to express, my voice trembling.

A half-smile lingered on his face.

“So, a second chance, huh?” he asked, and I felt intimidated by his words. Though, I nodded. Unconsciously.

“And what if it happens again?” he asked in a low voice, knitting his brows. His thumb kept brushing the knot on my arm, gently and slowly.

“Why would it happen again? You’re getting married to her; you two will be together,” I said. My chest tightened when I mentioned the word ‘married.’

He smiled slightly, leaving my arm, nodding. I clenched my fists.

I quickly looked away, when he leaned in closer to whisper in my ear, “Someone is acting like a good wife. Are you… falling for me?” His words sank deep into my ear, stirring my dormant senses and creating an intense sensation before I

abruptly stepped back from him.

"No! I am just…saying," I exclaimed, lowering the sleeve of my blouse before walking out of the library.

"Prove it," he said, following me out of the library, and I turned, looking at me.

"What?" I asked.

"That you are not falling for me? You don't care about me," he said, walking past me to sit on the couch, where his dinner awaited him.

"I am not," I stated.

"Ugh, I really don't want to eat all this. I don't even like these," he said, looking at the food.

My eyes widened, and I shook my head in disbelief. Seriously, I stayed up this late to see his tantrums?

"I brought everything you like. There are no beans, no pickles. It has jaggery, raw onion, and everything you enjoy," I pointed out, glancing at the plate again.

"See, I've caught you. You know everything I like." he smiled at me, and I immediately stepped back, not believing him.

"Well… ah, that's because I've been taking care of you and your family for quite some time now," I blurt, and he smirked, looking at me.

"Not at midnights, half-wife."

My body froze. What the hell did he say? The words hung in my throat.

I immediately rolled up my sleeves and said, "You brought me this, so should I take it as a sign that you're falling for me, too?"

He looked at my arm before looking back at me.

"Keep it covered, okay? It will help." His voice suddenly became concerned, and I dragged the sleeve down, saying, "I should go."

This didn't feel right.

I turned to walk away, but he called. ***"Suno,"*** "Hey."

I looked back at him.

"Stay," he said, and I inhaled deeply, shaking my head slowly. "Someone will get suspicious," I intoned.

"Wow, wisdom came, albeit late," he mocked, and I sighed in frustration.

"Come on," he said, and I couldn't explain why my feet moved toward him as he gestured for me to sit on the couch opposite him.

"I cannot," I said, gulping nervously, shaking my head, and fisting on the couch's top.

He insisted, gesturing for me to sit. Again.

I bit my lower lip, clenched my hands on my skirt, and walked around before sitting on the couch. He leaned forward to tear off a tiny piece of chapatti and began eating after putting it in the corner.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked softly, and he nodded.

"What does 'dinner not *dinner*' mean?" I murmured, and he half-smirked while pointing at the food with his index finger. "Dinner," he said, then lifted his finger toward me and repeated slowly, "*Dinner.*"

I immediately stood up from the couch; my heart raced like a horse. "Are you…" Mad? The words hung in my throat.

Smiling, he said, "As I said, I'm not in the mood today. You can calm down."

I shook my head mentally, not believing it. How could he say that? He was to be married in less than six months. And what was I doing here?

He asked, catching my attention, "Are you okay?"

The silence followed. His change of tone reminded me of his teasing nature.

He was just teasing me.

I nodded. "Yes, it's just the memory that won't fade away," I said, and he nodded in understanding.

"Try putting your brain somewhere else," he suggested, taking another bite. I bit my lower lip, unsure of where to put it. "Like what?" I asked, and he smirked a little.

"Like being… *dinner*," he teased again, and I sighed while rolling my eyes. I couldn't believe it. How could he talk like that?

I shot him a glare. "I feel pity for your wife."

He cocked his left brow at me. "Really?" while taking another bite, and I nodded.

"Yes, no girl would ever want her husband flirting with another woman. She would be devastated to find out. You need to be loyal to her," I tried to explain, and he looked at me, responding while taking a deep breath. "Says the one who is becoming a hurdle in that cause?"

I furrowed my brows, not understanding him, and asked. "What do you mean?"

He pushed the plate away, and I could sense he had gotten angry as he replied. "If you keep coming here, talking to me, and thinking about me, I won't be loyal to her. Not at all. We have to forget that, and you can't keep coming here," he said, more like an order, leaving my mouth open.

"You asked me to stay," I reminded him.

"Ah, th-that's because you wanted it," he spat back.

I inhaled sharply. "And since when did a royal prince care about the wants of a maid?" I raised my voice.

He stood up and walked towards me quickly. Before I could process it, he took the knife out of the sheath and placed it on my neck. My eyes widened with shock. My back pressed against the couch as he cornered me against it, putting his foot on either side of my feet. I felt weak in my knees, leaning back, longing for distance, and terrified to my core.

"Don't make me do amends in my good deeds, half-wife," he said with tight jaw and low voice, bringing tears of fear into my eyes.

"Do not call me that." Yet, I stood firm on my ground. He couldn't call me that.

His eyes softened, and his gaze followed the tear rolling down my cheek. He lowered his knife from my neck and said slowly, shaking his head, "Please… leave." His words chilled me as if the ocean wave had hit me hard. Freezing me.

I stepped back with a promise to myself and turned my head away from him. *I'm never going to see him again.*

I left his chamber, wiping the tear from my cheek. Why did I go to him? I should have seen it coming. He was the prince, and I was just the maid. I was becoming a problem in his marriage. What was wrong with me? I ran to my room and wrapped myself in comforters.

4

This couldn't happen.

The past she had suffered and survived couldn't become her future.

Putting the knife back in the sheath, I stared blankly at the cold food. She knew so much about me.

Her words told me a different story, but her gaze…it wasn't lying.

And whenever I find her staring at me with wide, innocent, and heavy eyes, I feel burdened by the layers of responsibility—that now were becoming more than just protection.

A part of me felt responsible for her happiness as well. At one moment, I sensed her eyes searching for a man more than a savior in me, but at another, she seamlessly reminded me of my sins.

I sat, holding my face in my palms. I shouldn't have put the knife on her neck either way. My anger heightened her fear.

But I couldn't stop myself when she clearly wanted to stay with me, hear me, and watch me, and then brought up how I'm cheating on my fiancée.

No.

This shouldn't happen, and this won't happen.

I had to stay away from her. Otherwise, I wouldn't do anything to my enemies or maintain my promises to myself.

Stay Away From Women.

It had been three days since we last talked, and things had heated. I couldn't shake off the flashes of her face. The tearful gaze, the shaky breaths, the sound of her heartbeats—it all added up to my growing insanity.

And the more I tried to avoid her, the closer I was drawn to her.

"Ji, Bhaisa, you called for me?" I asked, standing before Rudra Bhaisa. He lifted his gaze from a list.

I immediately plastered a smile on my face. I needed to forget about caring, worrying, and thinking about her.

"Yes, Agastya, I spoke with Badi Maasa, Daadisa, and Ranima, and they suggested we have the baby shower. Even the royal priest believes holding it in two days is ideal. So, I want you to take care of the responsibilities. I'll send out the invitations, and you can handle the decorations, menu, and hosting preparations," he explained, and a broad smile spread across my face.

"Celebration?" I asked, kneeling before him, and he nodded.

"Celebration!"

I loved celebrations, so I immediately jumped over him for a hug. He leaned back and patted my back.

"By the way, what happened in Mehrangarh?" he asked, nuzzling me away.

I gulped, shaking my head. "Nothing. It seems…normal," I lied, sitting beside him as I grabbed grapes from the basket.

"Strange. Are you sure?" he asked, and I nodded, meeting his gaze.

"Also, Mehrangarh seems pretty foolish." I chuckled, and he slapped my back. "You're a prince now. Act accordingly, both in front of others and behind the scenes," he scolded, only making me smile wider.

I loved Rudra and Ranvijay Bhaisa's care for me.

"Ranaji." Suddenly, her voice caught my attention, and I looked up, noticing her bringing a plate with a few attendees.

My smile faded as she knelt by the table, plating lunch.

"Have you eaten yet?" Bhaisa asked, and I shook my head, gazing at him.

"Suman, make one for Agastya as well," he instructed. She replied, "Ji, Ranaji."

"I…don't want to, Bhaisa. Actually…" I cleared my throat. "I need to work on something," I said, trying to avoid looking at her.

A strange ache built in my chest as I watched her.

Bhaisa stopped me and said, "No, eat first."

I gulped, unknowingly being pulled by her presence. Faded marks and two bangles razed her wrist. She didn't look at me.

"And how is Rashmika?" Bhaisa's voice broke my thoughts.

I briefly closed my eyes and replied, "She's good," while looking at him.

"I heard you didn't spend *Gangaur* with her," he said, and I smiled, shaking my head. "I wanted to, I really did, but I couldn't return from the temple on time." It was a half-truth.

"Oh! Why don't you invite her to Nandani's baby shower? That way, you'll spend more time together. Because, no matter what, she will be your wife," he said, staring into my eyes. His words held authority.

"Of course, my wife," I laughed abruptly, looking away from him.

Suman placed a diced onion and a bowl of jaggery on my plate. My heart sank. A thousand people inhabited the Kingdom, and nobody knew what I liked to eat.

"Thank you," I muttered, pulling it closer to me. Rudra Bhaisa began speaking.

She left without responding.

I couldn't eat a single bite, knowing I could do something for her, and I wasn't doing it.

I wanted to see her smile, if not much, then at least how she used to do before that incident. It wasn't like I had seen her, but I had noticed.

After having a few bites, I took leave from Rudra Bhaisa and returned to my chamber.

I was happy about the celebration, but a celebration only meant hectic days for her.

Our life as the royals was easy; we could command, but she had to work with her hands, listen to, and be answerable for certain things.

I understood it was her job, but she was mine now.

No!

She wasn't.

Still, why was I feeling strange and bothered by her presence and absence if she wasn't?

For the entire day, I focused solely on decorations and the upcoming event in the Kingdom. After finishing with the Kingdom's exterior, halls, galleries, and gardens, I finally arrived at Rudra Bhaisa and Nandani Bhabhisa's chamber.

I wasn't eager to go in. I knew that if I did, I would end up confronting her. Yet, I had no choice.

I couldn't ignore Bhaisa's words.

Only a day remained before the baby shower, and close relatives, especially Nandani Bhabhisa's family, had already arrived. When I reached their chamber, I saw everyone seated in the meeting area with Nandani Bhabhisa. I smiled before greeting them.

"*Pranam,* Daadisa." I first greeted Bhabhisa's grandmother, followed by her mother, Trisha, and Abhinandan. I couldn't forget their warm hospitality when I first met them during Holi after Rudra Bhaisa and Nandani Bhabhisa's wedding.

"How are your wedding preparations going, Agastya?" Daadisa asked as she pulled me down to sit beside her.

I inhaled sharply, struggling to come up with a response. "Great! Awesome!" I chuckled.

"I heard you visited your in-laws to celebrate Ganguar with your fiancée. How romantic!" Daadisa remarked.

I nervously shook my head as I noticed Suman bringing in the juice and snacks. She set the plate in front of Daadisa, smiled, and squatted to touch her feet.

"Pranam, Daadisa. How are you?" she asked warmly, her gaze never meeting mine. I noticed a pale glow with a mole on her right cheek as the sun's rays illuminated her face.

"God bless you. I am young, slim, and beautiful," Daadisa said, caressing Suman's head.

Everyone laughed.

I couldn't.

Her lips didn't form a smile either. Was something bothering her?

"I've heard you're taking great care of Nandani, Suman. I hope she isn't too much trouble," Daadisa laughed.

Suman shook her head and smiled. "Not at all, Daadisa," she replied before getting up to greet others.

I turned away from her, attempting to exchange smiles with Abhinandan, who returned the gesture while sitting across from me with Nandani Bhabhisa.

Meanwhile, Trisha and Nandani Bhabhisa were engaged in conversation.

Suman walked away to stand in the corner with the other attendees. Her gaze was lowered, her face expressionless, creating a knot in my stomach.

"Ugh." I looked at Daadisa and then at everyone else. "I have to go. I need to finish some work. I'll catch up with you all later," I said, rising to excuse myself.

Bhabhisa stared at me in disbelief. As I was leaving, I noticed Aishwarya Bhabhisa and Ranvijay Bhaisa entering.

"What happened?" Ranvijay Bhaisa stopped me.

"Nothing. I just need to take care of the decorations. I'll continue later," I explained, and he smiled.

"Alright,"

I spent the entire evening decorating Bhaisa and Bhabhisa's chamber. I didn't do it alone; I managed everything—the flower selection, the curtains, the colors—all of it.

It looked beautiful. I felt happy and on cloud nine, but one face's smile suddenly became crucial to me.

I wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but I couldn't. Hope was the last thing I could offer her, especially after seeing how drained she seemed.

After finishing the garden and the sitting area where the main event would take place, I walked back to meet Rudra Bhaisa and Bhabhisa before heading to my chamber.

The next day, I woke up early to begin working on the entrance. I called for the helpers and started before anyone else woke up. I couldn't sleep at all the night before.

My gaze fell on her as she worked nearby. She carried a plate of colors, and my brows knit in confusion, wondering what she would do with them.

She didn't notice me standing in the corner as she walked past. She seemed lost. Her face looked tired, with dark circles under her eyes, and her weakness was evident.

"Here, this is for the Rangoli," she said, handing the plate to another attendee.

"But why? You make the best Rangoli. Why aren't you making it?" the attendee asked her, to which she smiled and shook her head.

"I am…busy with other things," she replied.

"What's more important than making the Rangoli?" the attendee countered.

"I need to work in the kitchen before Nandani wakes up," she explained, and my brows knitted in confusion.

"Kunwarsa, where should we hang these red curtains?" a helper caught my attention, and I inhaled deeply, pointing to the top of the gallery. "There, how many times should I tell you?"

I noticed her walk past me, glancing at me briefly. I immediately followed her.

"Suno," "Hey," I called, but she continued walking, ignoring me.

My eyes widened at her audacity.

"Hey," I called again, quickening my pace, and she responded by walking even faster. I noticed a few attendees watching us. My jaw tightened.

"Hey," I shouted again, almost marching a foot behind her, before she turned right and headed to the kitchen.

Noticing the deserted corner, I quickly positioned myself in front of her and looked into her eyes. "Why are you running from me?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Why are you running after me?" she countered, inhaling deeply, a sign of her displeasure at my interruption.

"Why did you deny making the Rangoli?" I pressed, and she shook her head, attempting to walk past me as she replied, "Because I don't want to."

My brows knitted together. "Why?" I inquired, spreading my arms before her and gazing into her eyes.

"I have other important things to do," she stated, batting her eyelashes.

"What's more important than making the Rangoli? I've heard you create the best. Why aren't you making one for the baby's shower?" I asked, and she gulped.

The glow of her face faded as she tried to move past me again. I couldn't help but grip her wrist and pull her back in front of me.

Her eyes widened in shock, her hand gripping mine, her gaze fierce with anger. "Kunwarsa," she breathed in a low voice, warning me.

"This is an important day. Make the Rangoli," I said, almost pleadingly, my voice lowered.

"I can't," she replied immediately.

"Why?"

"I have other things to do."

"You don't love Bhabhisa and the baby?" I asked, stepping back when she looked uncomfortable.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I do love them, but I have other things to do," she insisted, and I found it hard to believe her.

"You can do those later. Just imagine how happy Bhabhisa will be to see the Rangoli made by you," I said, and she shook her head.

"Please," a tear rolled down her cheek, and noticing an attendee approaching, she quickly turned and dashed into the kitchen.

What was wrong?

She didn't seem herself.

5

Taking my inauspicious presence near Nandani was the last thing I wanted today. It was time for the baby shower, and everyone had gathered while I kept myself busy in the kitchen.

"Suman," an attendee's voice caught my attention, and I looked up from the curry I was stirring.

"Ranisa is asking for you," she informed, and I smiled, nodding.

"I will be there in a moment," I lied. She walked away.

I couldn't go closer to her. It was against the rituals, and although I didn't believe in any of the myths, I couldn't risk the baby, Nandani, or this family.

Sometimes, the celebration would end, and then I would mention my absence.

I kneeled before the stone grinder and added red chilies, salt, and garlic cloves. Daadisa loved red garlic chutney, so it seemed the best way to keep me occupied.

I took off my bangles in case they broke before I started.

"Suman," another attendee's voice caught my attention.

"Daadisa and Ranima are asking for you in the celebration." She laughed, "It's really fun there. Everyone's dancing."

Smiling and nodding, I said, "I'll be there soon. I'm preparing something special for Daadisa." Then she walked away.

When the next attendee called me, I quickly finished my business in the kitchen and stepped outside to find a better hiding place.

As White adjusted the dupatta on my head, I noticed some chutney on my bright yellow outfit. It was an old, faded piece. I sighed, trying to rub it off while walking through the gallery.

Suddenly, an arm held mine and dragged me to the corner. My eyes widened, but the touch immediately reminded me of him, intensified by the scent of mild jasmine and spice.

"What are you doing?" I asked as he pressed me against the wall. I glanced away from his green eyes and angled my shoulder against his chest when he tried to come closer and hide us behind the curtain.

"It's been so long; everyone's asking you to come to the celebration. What are you doing?" he asked in a low voice.

I gulped nervously, lowering my gaze.

Why did he care?

"I'm busy," I replied softly, trying to walk away. His sudden appearance sent chills down my spine.

"What are you wearing?" he asked after a moment's pause. His voice was now calm and concerned.

"Clothes," I replied, subconsciously pushing him away while consciously melting in his presence.

"Is something wrong? Why are you acting like this? Everyone was fine until the celebration. You can take part in activities but didn't make the Rangoli, didn't come to the celebration…dance?" His last word made me lift my gaze.

"Hey," he breathed, gently touching my chin with his fingertip to make me look at him.

When my eyes locked onto his, a thunderous jolt surged down my spine. His brows knitted together, hair cascading over his sweaty forehead, nose sharp, and lips curling into a nervous twitch.

"What is wrong?" he asked, his voice low and calm.

"Nothing," I retorted, pulling my chin back. He moved closer, causing me to retreat, and my left shoulder bumped against the wall.

"Then come with me to the celebration," he said, holding my wrist and pulling me. I fisted my hand, standing my ground and shaking my head.

"I can't."

He inhaled sharply as I withdrew my wrist from his grip. A tear rolled down my cheek as I cast my gaze downward. "Why?" he asked, leaning closer to my ear, his voice low.

My breathing shallowed, and my heart raced, feeling his presence so close: authoritative, comforting, yet uncomfortable.

"I just can't," I tried to say. I didn't understand why he couldn't see my situation. It wasn't the same as before. I knew people weren't aware that I was a widow, but I was aware of it. And I couldn't overlook it.

"You're hurting my Bhabhisa," he said, and I gazed into his eyes.

"No, I can never hurt her," my voice broke, feeling a lump in my throat and my knees weak.

"Then you must have been with her," he said, pulling me out again as he held my hand.

"Kunwarsa." I shook my head. "Please, try to understand."

"Make me understand," his voice was deep and menacing.

"I am a widow," the words slipped out unfiltered.

"What?" he asked. The noise of attendees running and laughing caught my attention. I looked away from him, trying to walk away.

But he held my hand and said, "Come with me."

My eyes widened in shock, and I stood rigid, pulling my wrist from his grip. "Kunwarsa, please let go of my hand. What are you doing?"

"Kunwarsa," I whispered, yelling. "What are you doing? And why do you even care? I can't go there. It is an auspicious occasion for Nandani. I can't ruin it," I said, and he looked back at me and stepped forward, making me stumble back and hit the pillar behind the curtains.

"I don't believe in all this. It's important for Bhabhisa that you stay there; you have to," he said, lifting his finger at me, and I inhaled deeply.

"I can't," I repeated, staring back into his eyes.

He declared, "I'm serious; you have no option."

"Yes, I don't have a choice. My life is different now. And why do you even care?" I raised my voice slightly.

He stepped forward quickly, and I shifted onto my toes, feeling his chest nearer to mine. My heart raced in my throat. The anger in his eyes was evident, even though he was trying to conceal it it.

"It doesn't matter. You didn't live with him, he didn't care for you, and when the hearts weren't one, how could a few rituals bind you together?" he asked, breathing over my face.

"No!" I blurt out, trying to calm myself. "It can bind us because I did marry him, and I am his widow," I said, blinking nervously and pressing my hand against his chest to keep him away. It wasn't right. He shouldn't have been here.

His presence was making me weak. And, strangely, my own words were slipping me into doubts.

"No," he breathed, bringing his palm closer to my cheek. I turned my face away. The memories of the last time we got this close, when he tied the holy thread around my arm, still lingered in my mind.

And then, how he sent me away.

It was all a joke to him. I was a joke to everyone.

"Hey," he called out, his voice dropping low, and before he could touch me, I pushed him away and walked past.

I noticed him following me as I paced faster through the busy gallery. A few attendees walked past me carrying the plates of flower petals, powered red color, and dancer's anklet bells.

"Suman, where are you going?" Reva asked, stopping before me. I glanced back at him, who approached closer and took the powered red color plate from Reva's hand.

"Get another one," he ordered, and my eyes widened in disbelief. "Ji, Kunwarsa." She silently walked away, and oddly, I felt something dangerous was crossing his mind.

I immediately turned to walk as fast as I could. But he gripped my hand and pulled me to the side, behind the curtains. Intensely gazing into my eyes, he asked, "You were saying something?", making my heart race. His words were provocative.

I gulped, staring back into his eyes, and pulled myself back.

"What are you doing? Kunwarsa," my breath hitched as he stepped closer, forcing me to take a step back, pressing my back against the wall.

He placed the plate in the corner of the flower stand and brought his hand closer to my cheek. I shook my head, stopping him. Tears welled in my eyes, not because of his actions, but because he was so close that I might end up doing something we both would regret.

"You can't touch me," I reminded him, glancing away and lowering my gaze, almost pressing my cheek against the wall.

"Why exactly?" he asked, leaning in closer, his face only a few inches away. I could feel his warm breath on my face. The anger was clear in his tone.

"You know, exactly, why? What are you doing?" I questioned in my breaking voice, and he sucked in a deep breath.

"Bhabhisa and everyone are waiting for you. I understand you have a war happening in your mind, but whatever you think —"

I cut him off. "It's not what I think. My reality is different, and I can't be with—"

"Why?" he asked, gulping.

I gazed up shakily into his eyes. “I am a…” My words hung in my throat as I slowly drowned into the intense, wild waves of the green ocean that surrounded me, swallowed me, and added a layer of hope. No!

“I am a widow,” I finished. Hope was the last thing I should have, or lives would be burnt.

“Seriously?” he asked, his gaze dropping to my lips.

I reminded him, “I should stay away from celebrations, colors, pregnant women, and marital rituals—”

He cut me off. “Happiness,”

I gulped, feeling weak in my knees. His intense gaze warmed my cheeks. “Happiness,” my voice came out shaky.

His gaze fell to my bare feet before returning to my eyes. I blinked nervously, and my entire body shivered when his elbow bolted the plate of colors. It slammed to the ground with a metallic clang, splattering colors across my face, shoulders, arms, and clothes. I shut my eyes in fear.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” he exclaimed, prompting me to open my eyes and notice a few splatters on his jaw and a broad smile. “I’ll clean it!” He chuckled, hurrying his palm closer to my cheek, but I instantly pushed him away, letting a tear roll down my cheek, and walked away.

He was playing with me.

But before I could go far, he held my hand, stopping me. His grip glided from my wrist to my hand, smudging the red between our palms.

I looked back at him. His gaze softened as he said. “I will be responsible if anything happens to anyone in your presence.”

Inhaling a deep breath, I struggled to pull my hand from his. “I can’t take risks with anyone’s life,” I replied slowly.

He gulped, tightening his hold on my hand, and pulled me closer to him. I almost jumped, crashing into his chest. “Nothing happened to me.”

“Should I wait for something to happen to you?” I asked, letting another tear fall. He was making it hard for me. I wanted him to go, but I also wanted him to stay.

“What will happen to me?” he asked.

I inhaled sharply, shaking my head. “Anything can happen to you. Didn’t you hear, the man who married…” I halted, my tongue unable to roll out the following words. I couldn’t even imagine anything happening to him.

“What?” he asked. I didn’t know why he wanted to hear things from my mouth; I didn’t want to say.

“I am inauspicious now,” I made it simpler.

A smile lingered on his face. “If I touch you, will something bad happen to me?” he asked. I stood frozen under his intense gaze. My brows furrowed as he placed his palm on my cheek, his long fingers gliding down to my ears, almost reaching my neck, with his thumb gently brushing over my cheekbone.

“Nothing happened,” he stated after a brief silence.

My heart raced. His cologne wrapped around me, and his words spun my world.

What was I doing?

No!

No. This was wrong.

What was he doing here? He shouldn’t be here.

I immediately pushed him away. Overwhelming tears streamed down my face as I noticed the red color on his fingers. He couldn’t do this to me.

I couldn’t do this to him.

He stood, shocked, as waves of reality visibly washed over his face. I shook my head before running away to my room.

When I reached the quarters, I immediately raced to the bathing area. It was empty, as all the attendees were busy celebrating. Stepping down the stairs to the shared pool, I kneeled on the last step and leaned forward to wash my hand.

But as soon as I looked at my reflection in the water, my heart stopped. The red imprints of his fingers weren’t just a mistake but a gesture of my belonging to him.

I looked at my palms, smudged with red powder. I immediately turned around to notice the imprints of my red feet on the wet stairs.

Tears welled in my eyes.

No.

He couldn’t do this to me.

Why was he making me familiar with the color forbidden for me? Why wasn’t he scared of my fate ruining his life? And, most importantly, why was he interested in me this way?

“Suman,” an attendee’s voice caught my attention, and I turned around to look at her.

“Yes,” I asked, wiping away my tears.

“Ranisa is asking for you,” she said, and I smiled, nodding.

He promised me that nothing would happen. Although I didn’t believe in superstitions, I still couldn’t risk the lives of people I wholeheartedly loved.

But, the red color imprinted on my cheeks, forearms, palms, and feet were not only his ideology, but more like his confidence in my fate, and order to me.

So, I trusted both my fate and his trust in it.

I went to the celebration and enjoyed it to the fullest. Nandani was happiest watching *Daadisa* and Princess *Aishwarya* dance for her.

Suman

It's been two weeks since that incident—encounter—whatever.

I had been trying hard to avoid him. I wouldn't go near Nandani if he was around. I wouldn't go to his chamber even if Nandani asked me to; I would send another attendee as he suggested. I wouldn't even look at him if he crossed my path.

No, I wasn't angry. But he was right. Even if nothing happened, I might stand between him and his wife. Maybe. And I could never become the person I deeply hated—a mistress.

What was I even thinking?

As I cleaned Nandani's chamber late in the afternoon, thousands of thoughts raced through my mind when she suddenly let out a scream. "Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh,"

I ran toward the resting area, my heart racing as I gazed upon her leaning against the wall. Water trickled from her core, running down her legs.

"Nandani," I yelled, and "Reva, call the physician," I added, motioning for Reva to hurry.

"Aaahhhh, I think… the baby is coming… aha."

Ranaji rushed toward her. "Nandani!"

"Ahhh, Rudra," she cried out in pain, and he immediately turned to me. "Have Agastya send a letter to Mahabaleshgarh."

I stood stunned.

What? How could I?

Lifting her in his arms, he hurried to the inside of the chambers. The physicians came running.

My heart raced as I impulsively ran towards his chamber. I lifted my skirt slightly and dashed forward, my heart pounding inexplicably—perhaps it was time for good news. Yet, dread crept in, thinking of the pain she would endure. The sound of her single cry sent chills down my spine, leaving me uncertain about her delivery.

I navigated through the bustling galleries, chaos enveloping me as I neared his chamber. My sole intention was to convey the news and return to her swiftly. However, upon entering his chamber, an unsettling emptiness overwhelmed me, intensifying my heartbeat. Memories rushed back—remnants of that day when his hand had brushed against mine, and the touch still lingered on my arm. I took a deep breath, attempting to calm my racing thoughts.

"Kunwarsa," I called out, entering his chamber after taking due permission from the soldiers standing outside.

With no response from the other side, I felt compelled to venture further inside.

It's been almost two weeks since that incident. Since then, we've only had a few meetings. He was doing everything he could to ignore me, and I was doing my utmost to make him feel as if I didn't even exist.

As I entered his chamber, the soft jingle of my anklet bells resonated gently. I explored the meeting and resting area, making my way to the fencing and study area, curious if he might be working there. Stepping into his bedroom sent chills down my spine. The memory of his breath in my ear and haunting words lingered in my mind. I hadn't sensed it before, but now it was undeniable.

I knew I shouldn't have come here or anywhere near him.

However, despite my intense struggles, I couldn't deny that he was becoming my everything. I felt tied to him. The thought that something could happen to him because he married me pushed me away even more, while also drawing me closer to him.

"Kunwarsa," I called out again, but he didn't respond. Again.

Taking a deep breath, I realized I had no choice but to step into his bedroom.

Biting my lower lip and adjusting the dupatta on my head, I quietly entered. A subtle fragrance of jasmine and lavender filled the air. The encroaching darkness immediately caught my attention. I swallowed nervously at the pin-drop silence and tried to look around for him.

He was sitting on neither his couch nor the bed.

I hesitated to walk any further and tried to call out, "Kunwar Agastya," My voice echoed in the chamber, and a slight fear crept into my nerves. I took a few more steps toward the changing area, blinking anxiously.

Did something happen to him? No!

My fingers were shaking a bit.

Should I leave?

But I had to inform him know, right? Otherwise, Nandani's family would not make it on time.

I inhaled deeply and kept walking toward the changing room. The door was closed. I clenched my fist and tried to knock, but it shifted as I touched it. It was open.

I tried to peek inside.

"Taaka Jhanki Karne Aayi ho?" "Did you come to peek in?"

I jumped in fear upon hearing his deep, lazy voice and feeling the cold blade pressed against my throat, along with a presence looming behind me.

I shook my head right away. He drew the dagger even closer. I stepped back, and my back hit his chest. The scent of fresh

bathing oils enveloped me. A few drops of water splashed onto my shoulder from his hair.

"Hum kyu taaka jhaaki Karenge aapke kaksh me?" "Why would I try to peek in your chamber?" I asked in a shaky and scared voice.

"To fir? Apne patni hone Ka adhikar lene aayi ho?" "Then? You arrived to demand the rights to be my wife?" he asked.

I felt another drop of water fall on my shoulder, which trickled slowly further down my chest, disappearing into my blouse.

I inhaled sharply.

My heart raced as he gently took my dupatta off my head and rubbed-dried his hair. Water droplets splashed wildly on my arms and cheeks, leaving my stomach twisted.

"Daasi hai hum, patni hone ka adhikar kyu mangenge aapse?" "I'm a maid; why would I ask for the rights of a wife?" I stuttered.

He chuckled softly, bringing the dagger closer to my neck. I couldn't help but grip his wrist tightly.

"I feel scared, Kunwarsa," I stated. My knees grew weaker.

"If you're feeling scared, why are your cheeks flushed?" he asked. New sensations bubbled to the surface of my skin at the sound of his deep voice.

I struggled more desperately to escape his grasp, but with the blade so close to my neck, I remained sensually paralyzed between him and the door. I couldn't understand why he took pleasure in toying with me.

"I'm not blushing," I shot back, feeling his face move closer to the side of my neck as his dangerously sensual voice dripped from his lips. "You are." His words stirred a warmth deep within me. "Your cheeks have a rosy tint, and your lips… resemble a freshly sliced… berry."

I was unsure why I felt hot around him. Gulping nervously and blinking, helplessly, I replied. "I'm not, Kunwar Agastya."

"Really?" he asked, bringing his hand around my waist.

Why was he doing this to me?

The back of my head rested against his chest, my brows furrowing, lips parting, and eyelashes growing heavier as his rough, large, tanned fingers brushed the bare side of my waist.

Feeling the tickling touch of his finger, the hair on my body stood on end in anticipation. His fingers slowly traveled along the curve of my waist, reaching my navel.

I exhaled deeply.

The words caught in my throat, and my eyes closed tightly from the manly touch that had never felt this comforting and tender before. I sensed his lips drawing near to my ear, pulling me back to reality in an instant. "Hence, proved, half wife," he drawled.

I quickly pushed his wrist away from my waist. He chuckled softly, and I couldn't help but exclaim in a single breath. "Please leave me; Nandani is in labor. Ranaji asked you to write a letter to Mahableshgarh. That's the only reason I came here."

"What?" He tilted his head to the side and asked me with a broad smile, "What did you say?" He inquired cheerfully and moved the dagger away from my neck. I quickly touched my neck with shaking fingers and took a few hurried steps back from him.

Tears welled in my eyes. He stood half-naked, and I shook my head, mentally screaming at myself to indulge his foolish adventures.

"Ranaji asked me to tell you to write a letter to Mahableshgarh," I repeated, stepping away from him before running off.

It couldn't happen. No.

I couldn't feel that way about him.

I shouldn't have gone there.

I hurried back to Nandani's chamber and found her lying on the bed, the curtains drawn, her loud, agonizing screams echoing through the chamber.

"Aaaaahhhhhhh," she screamed in pain, and I glanced at the physicians beside her.

"When will she be able to deliver?" Ranaji asked, worry evident in his eyes. I turned to the physicians for their response. "The baby's feet are on the left, while the head is on the right. We need to wait until his head moves down."

Ranaji inhaled deeply and gently stroked Nandani's head. "Until then, will she endure the pain?" he asked, and the physicians nodded. "Yes, we will have to wait until the child turns around."

"Aahhhhhhhhhh," she screamed even louder, and I walked toward her with trembling steps. I held her hand. She looked at me.

"Sumannnnnn," she burst into painful cries, and I attempted to caress her hand with my shaky fingers.

"It's alright, it's alright, just calm down," I attempted to say. She breathed in deeply, her chest rising and falling.

"We should have her change her clothes first," the physician said, and I quickly responded. "I'll find something loose for her to wear."

I got out of bed and rushed to her dressing room. As I searched through her trunks, I found the gown she needed and brought

it back to the bedroom.

“Jiji,” Princess Aishwarya called out, dashing into the bedroom. She adjusted the dupatta on her head, noticing Ranaji, and settled onto the bed beside me.

Ranaji left Nandani’s hand, saying, “I will be back.”

She nodded at him. Princess Aishwarya and I helped her sit up. She groaned in pain as we removed her jewelry and other belongings. Princess Aishwarya untied the strings of Nandani’s blouse while I pulled the strings of her skirt.

I assisted her in putting on the gown before she lay back on the bed.

Her screams persisted until midnight. We tried to feed her, but she was too weak to eat. However, Ranaji insisted she consume something while the physicians worked to reposition the baby in her womb.

"Get warm water," the physician instructed. I immediately stepped off the bed and hurried to the kitchen. It was late at night, and no one was around.

"Suno," “Listen,” Kunwarsa’s voice caught my attention. I turned to look at him.

“Ji," I asked.

The fire had gone out in the stove, so I rushed to gather some wood. Kneeling in front of the small stove, I added the wood and looked around for the fire torch.

“How is Bhabhisa now?” he asked, squatting beside me. He was upset.

“She’s in pain,” I said shakily, rushing toward the torch to bring it to the stove. Kneeling again, I tried to light the fire, but my nervous, sweaty hands made it hard to focus. Memories of that day flooded my mind.

I attempted to ignore them, but the screams and heat of that day surged through my nerves, and tears flowed down my cheeks.

“Give me that.” He took the fire torch from my hand. I stepped back.

I gazed at my shaking fingers, drawing my knees tightly to my chest. Confusion overwhelmed me as my heart raced and my breaths turned shallow. In an instant, I felt a desperate struggle to breathe. I closed my eyes, attempting to soothe my chest with gentle rubs.

I heard the distant sound of him placing the water-filled vessel on the stove. Suddenly, he wrapped his arm around me, and I couldn’t help but burst into tears.

“It’s alright, take a deep breath, she’ll be fine,” he caressed my arm.

I tightened my fist around his wrist, turned slightly, and pressed my face against his chest. Then I wrapped my arms around him, feeling his hand resting on my head.

“Calm down; you need to give her strength. It’s okay; everything is fine,” he said, and I tried not to look at the fire.

He shifted in front of me, obstructing the view of the fire, and I attempted to calm my racing heartbeat.

“Focus on your breathing,” he said, rubbing his hand on my back. “Calm down.”

I didn’t know what was happening to me, but his words kept me grounded. He kept caressing my head until my heartbeat and breathing returned to a normal rhythm. The water had warmed up, and I tried to stand on my feet.

“I have to go,” my voice wavered.

He looked at me and suggested, “I’ll take it.”

I immediately shook my head and pushed his hand away. “You can’t,” I said, grabbing the edges of the vessels with the cloth and standing up.

I sauntered back to Nandani’s chamber. Her screams had only grown louder. I placed the vessel near the physicians.

Blood flowed from her; it scared me. I looked at Princess Aishwarya, who offered her strength with encouraging words and gently caressed her head.

Ranaji entered and sat beside her, taking her hand. “Come on, Nandani,” he said, prompting her to cry out loudly. Her anguished screams made my knees weak. But I couldn’t just leave like that. The memories of lying on that pyre clouded my vision.

I blinked, attempting to clear my thoughts, but it felt impossible.

“Come on, Nandani, push!” Ranaji urged, as she threw her legs and stretched her body in pain. “I can’t, Rudra! I can’t! Aaaahhhh!” Her screams grew louder, and I did my best to assist the physicians with whatever they needed, trying not to focus on those painful thoughts.

Agastya

My footsteps raced through the gallery, and my fingers trembled. After sending the letter to Mahabaleshgarh, I came to Bhaisa's chamber. But I stopped my rapid steps like any other man waiting outside their bedroom.

Bhabhisa was screaming. I had never heard a voice so intense and painful in my life, except for once I saw her lying on that pyre.

Strangely, life and death can make you cry the same.

I didn't know why, but these screams—though they signaled good news and a new family member—brought back memories of her painful screams.

It's been over a month, yet the image of that pyre, her lying there alive, a man lighting the flames, and the crowd awaiting to hear her screams remained as vivid as that reality was. Dangerous—something that could break someone for the rest of their life.

I did not know what came to mind when I read her letter. I had known her as much as I had known the soldiers of our army—living in the same kingdom but having little interaction. Still, I couldn't stop myself from saving her.

But our conversations were no longer restricted to formal messages. I understood that it meant nothing, at least not for either of us. Yet, that incident instilled in me a sense of guilt.

I couldn't erase the visuals of her crying in my arms, her tiny hands, which used to serve food to me, fisting on my clothes, and her voice, shaking, crying, begging, that used to bring me messages from Bhabhisa, everything told me she was a nice person, that she did not deserve to die.

I couldn't calculate the consequences back then and still can't.

Now, whenever I see her, I feel a connection. I believe it's my duty to keep her safe from those people.

I felt deeply drawn to her. I couldn't figure out why I struggled to stay away whenever she walked into my room. Each time she stood before me, I felt an irresistible urge to engage, tease, or do anything to make her want to linger with me.

Her skin felt soft against mine. Her lips had never looked so beautiful. Or perhaps I was just noticing this now. She had stunning eyes, and whenever she applied kohl to them, like today, it made me feel, maybe without my choice, that she was mine.

In the past two weeks, I've noticed that she has been ignoring me, and I've also done my best to ignore her. However, just glancing would have made me feel that everything with her was real.

Still, she couldn't be my secret affair. Even though my defenses crumbled before her, I tried hard to mask them with my rudeness. I couldn't get close to her.

Everything was going against my original plan.

I wanted to be close to her before I left for Mehrangarh again. Because if anything happened to me, she would blame herself.

Believe it or not, it was evident in her eyes that she saw me as more than just a prince now. Her fierce demeanor towards me and her ferocious words implied she felt a claim on me. Everything was driving me crazy.

Suddenly, Bhabhisa's screams grew even louder, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I intertwined my fingers and felt a hand on my shoulder.

I turned to look at Ranvijay Bhaisa. "Bhaisa," I said, prompting for a hug.

"Oh, what happened?" he asked, amused, as I felt him gently patting my back.

"It's okay, Agastya; it happens during childbirth; she will be fine." His words made me even more tense, and I closed my eyes.

"I don't know, Bhaisa; she's the only person I've ever known as my mother figure," I mumbled.

He brushed his fingers through my hair and replied. "Just a little more time, and we will both become a father figure to someone,"

I immediately broke the hug and looked at him.

"Yes, yes, I will become Kaakusa," I said with a slight smile. He narrowed his brows. *Chote Kaakusa*." He corrected me, and I smiled.

"Sixteen days fast, no, no, twenty-one, twenty-five, twenty-five days fasting, I need a girl, a girl…" I continued negotiating with God and walked toward the corner.

My gaze landed on my half-wife walking through the gallery to the other side of the chamber. I sprinted to stand in front of her.

"How is she doing now?" I asked.

She furrowed her brows while looking at me. "Same."

Okay, she was mad about the Hot thing. She hurried past me.

"What does 'same' mean?" I asked, following her while keeping my eyes open not to get noticed by anyone.

"In pain," she replied, stepping into Bhabhisa's dressing area. I followed her inside and watched as she opened a trunk.

"When is the girl coming out?" I inquired politely.

She lifted her 'Unbelievable' gaze to my eyes. "It's going to be a boy," she countered.

My eyes widened. "No," I said. "It's definitely a girl."

She clicked her tongue in frustration and grabbed a fresh pair of clothes. “No, no, her symptoms indicated a boy,” she stated.

I didn’t understand; it upset me. There were three boys; we needed a girl. I had never even seen a baby girl.

“But I asked for a girl,” I countered, “I even told Bhabhisa that I wanted a girl,”

She immediately looked at me in disbelief. “Girls or boys do not depend on a woman; it’s up to God,” she said.

“But I negotiated with him, too,” I replied. “I know it will be a girl. The Princess of Suryagarh, and she will call me *Chote Kaakusa*,”

She side-eyed at me. “It’s going to be a boy. The next king of Suryagarh, the physicians said,” She said, closing the trunk.

I didn’t know why, but blood rushed to her cheeks whenever she got furious, and her lips looked redder. Kissable.

Fuckable too.

I let out a sigh to control my intentions with her.

"Girl," I affirmed, biting my lower lip and following her back slowly.

She shook her head. “Boy,”

I couldn’t help but click my tongue. "Girl," I repeated.

“Boy,” she turned her furious gaze at me. “Boy, who will call me *Maasima*,”

My heart raced, gazing into her eyes. “It’s going to be a girl,” I repeated, but she shook her head and walked away.

I seized her hand, pulled her back, and pinned her against the wall.

Her eyes widened with shock.

“Bet,”

She inhaled deeply, paused momentarily, and declared, “Bet!” I gulped. “And if it’s a boy, you will never touch me again!“ she exclaimed, lowering her gaze to my hand and holding her wrist between our chests.

A challenge.

I sucked in a deep breath, replying. “And if it’s a girl, you are going to suck me on her every birthday.”

Her eyes enlarged, and words stuck in her throat.

A smile remained on my face.

The loud scream of Bhabhisa broke the eye battle. “Go,” I left her hand. “She needs you, *Kaakisa*.” I said.

She sighed before walking away.

When I walked out, Ranvijay Bhaisa’s voice caught my attention. “What’s going on?” He noticed me coming out of the dressing room after her.

“What were you talking to her about? Huh? You’re getting married in just four months. Cut out the flirting,” he said, and I immediately chuckled, shaking my head.

“Flirting? I was just asking her about Bhabhisa, *Bhaisa*.” I smiled.

He pulled away from my ear. “It’s alright then.” He said.

Suddenly, the whole chamber turned chaotic, and we both heard a faint sound of crying.

"Finally!"

"Finally! Congratulations.”

We hugged each other tightly, and I felt goosebumps all over my body.

The attendees ran with the loud announcement. “It’s a girl, Ranisa is fine!!”

“It’s a girl, Ranisa is fine!!!”

My smile widened by two inches, and I felt like I might suddenly die from happiness.

“It’s a girl, Bhaisa. It’s a girl, our daughter.” I squealed, though tears filled my eyes.

“Yes, Agastya, it’s a girl, the Princess of Suryagarh,” he said.

I immediately shook my head. “I need to ask the attendees to make the sweets; our Bhaisa has become a father! Oh, my God!” Tears of happiness rolled down my cheeks.

Ranvijay Bhaisa laughed. “Yes, I need to prepare for the baby’s first shower.” he said.

I noticed my half-wife approaching us.

“Prince Ranvijay, Prince Agastya, Ranaji is asking for you both.” she drawled, and I noticed her red cheeks.

She didn’t even raise her eyes to meet mine, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. *You are dead.*

Ranvijay Bhaisa and I walked into Rudra Bhaisa’s bedroom. Nandani Bhabhisa’s curtained bed caught my attention. Rudra Bhaisa walked to us with the baby in his arms.

“Come in and meet our daughter,” he said, his voice emotional and his cheeks glistening with tears. The baby appeared tiny in his arms, like a small papaya. My gaze fixated on her tiny face. She had a bit of hair on her head, and her lips were a soft pink.

“Her height is going to be the same as Bhabhisa’s.” I couldn’t help, and laughter broke in the bedroom.

“Can I hold her?” I looked at Ranvijay Bhaisa, and Rudra Bhaisa nodded. “Of course.”

I watched closely as Rudra Bhaisa passed the baby to Ranvijay Bhaisa, and I couldn’t understand why my palms sweat with nervousness.

What if he could not hold her, and she fell?

No, no, why was I having such disturbing thoughts?

I quickly shoved those thoughts aside and glanced at Ranvijay Bhaisa, cradling her in his arms.

“She is really so small and beautiful, Bhaisa,” he said, and I nodded.

“She’s a girl,” I said, and Rudra Bhaisa chuckled softly. “Yes, yes, she is a girl, just as you asked,” he said.

Ranvijay Bhaisa slowly tried to hand me the baby. I immediately shook my head and took a step back. “She is so small. Bhabhisa will kill if something happens to her. I will play with her in a few months; I just want to look at her,” I said, and everyone laughed.

“Then give her to me,” Aishwarya Bhabhisa said in a voice that caught our attention. She walked toward us and took the baby from Bhaisa’s hand. “She needs to be fed,” she informed, carefully taking the baby in her arms.

“How is Bhabhisa now?” Ranvijay Bhaisa asked, and Aishwarya Bhabhisa replied, “Weak and in pain,” before walking away.

“Agastya, instruct everyone in the kitchen to prepare sweets for the entire Kingdom, comprising all one hundred and nine villages, and Ranvijay, dispatch invitations to all our allied Kingdoms and arrange a grand feast for the sixth day,” Rudra Bhaisa commanded, and we both nodded in agreement.

“But, Bhaisa, you know I’m a little weak on ingredients,” I said, “I mean, I could use someone’s help.”

He turned his gaze to the half-wife and called. "Suman,"

She looked at us and came running. “Ji, Ranaji,”

Rudra Bhaisa ordered, “Go with Kunwar Agastya, help him make the list of ingredients needed, and take care of the preparations for the sweets.”

I noticed her eyes widen at the mention of my name, and I couldn’t help but bite my lip slightly to suppress a smile.

“But, Ranaji, Ranisa might need me. Should I send someone else?” She asked.

Bhaisa shook his head. “I’m here with her, and I’ll send the message if she asks for you. The sweets are pretty important,” he said in a slow, slightly pleading voice.

She nodded immediately. “Yes, Ranaji,” she said, slightly bowing while glaring at me.

I felt like celebrating twice: first for the girl and second for winning the bet.

“Let’s go,” I said, but she walked past me without glancing. I nodded at Bhaisa, and he smiled back.

I walked away and noticed her hurrying to the kitchen.

"Ab bhaag kyu rahi ho?" “Why are you running now?” I called.

Suman

I was trying to walk as fast as I could. His footsteps trailed behind me at the same pace. What the hell just happened? A girl? How could I have such bad luck in just a month?

No, the girl wasn't the misfortune; my choice was indeed one. But I didn't agree to the bet.

Yes, I did not. I did. Urghhhh. Yet, I didn't even respond to him.

"Why are you running?" I heard his voice, and a shiver ran down my spine. I took a deep breath, trying to focus on my walking while ignoring him, but with his long legs, he quickly closed the gap and started walking beside me.

As we moved through the less crowded—the empty—gallery, with all the attendees rushing around joyfully, he said, "Don't worry, I'm in no rush. You can take your time."

The teasing in his slow, deep voice made me take a deep breath and look at him, momentarily pausing my feet. "It's wrong; you're getting married in just four months," I mumble.

He inhaled deeply, gazing at me, and stepped forward. Fear surged through me, and I instinctively stepped back, glancing around.

Another step closer, and I felt my back hit the wall behind me. I shifted nervously from foot to foot, watching him approach, erasing the two-foot distance between us. I tried to say, "What are you doing? Kunwarsa, someone will see us." My voice came out shaky.

He replied slowly, ***"Tooti footi, kachi pakki, nakli, asli hi sahi, thodi si patni to ho na hamari, shart haari ho to vo to karna padega.***" "Real, fake, broken, half-full, you are my wife, even if just a little. Now that you have lost the bet, you have to do that." His slow voice made my cheeks flush.

I couldn't understand why his words weakened my knees, and I tried to respond, especially to the half-wife comment.

"Aap hamare pati nahi hai... vidh..." "You are not my husband… I am a wid…" I found myself unable to finish. The colorful memory of that day and the thought that he could die after marrying me echoed in my ears, leaving me speechless.

How can I be a bad omen for the person who saved my life?

"Say it," he urged, his gaze intense, and I opened my eyes, staring back at him with equal intensity.

"This is wrong. You should act as if I'm dead. Please, I know you're just teasing me, but don't do this," I pleaded.

He inhaled deeply while looking at me. There was a calculated pause between us, and he nodded slowly. "Fine," he said. "but even if you weren't my half, little bit of a wife and had lost a bet, I would still ask you to keep your promise. I'm committed to my bets."

"But I didn't agree."

I noticed an attendee approaching us; I immediately pushed him away and started walking normally.

"You did," he said, trailing behind me.

He seemed truly happy for the first time since that incident. Yet, his presence made me feel uneasy. I averted my gaze and observed him as he twirled his dagger.

"Vese agar sabko pata hota to tumhe hamari bhatiji Kaakisa kehti ya Maasima?" "Let's say that if everyone knew about us, what would my niece call you, *Kaakisa* or *Maasima*?" he inquired, his lips curling into a teasing smile.

I clenched my jaw. "My dead husband has five children, and I'm technically their mother, so what would they call you? Father?" I asked, and he turned to me with annoyance, making me smile.

"Shut up," he whispered; a victorious smile remained on my face as we walked into the kitchen together.

As soon as we stepped through the door, we became strangers again.

I noticed him reverting to a serious demeanor. He asked everyone to pay attention before lecturing them about the sweets they needed to prepare. It was early morning, and no one had gotten any rest, not even for a moment. It felt like a festival in the kingdom.

"Suno," "Listen," he called, as always.

I didn't know why, but I remembered him whenever anyone called me 'Suno.'

"Ji," I replied, watching him animatedly count on his fingers.

"800 tons of gram flour for laddus?" he asked, furrowing his brows. I lowered my gaze, recalling that during Ranaji's coronation ceremony, we had ordered 200 tons of gram flour to accommodate all the kingdoms. This time, the feast would encompass six times as many people as the last one: the entire villages and Kingdoms.

I suggested, "One hundred nine villages will be invited, so I think we should plan for 1,500 tons,"

He noted this down with the help of an assistant who wrote everything.

"And dry fruits?" he asked, and I calculated the amounts of dried fruits while assisting him with the details. "10 tons of cardamom, 150 tons of almonds, 150 tons of peanuts…" I said, and he widened his eyes at me when I finished.

"I thought *ladoos* looked smaller," he remarked, making me chuckle softly. I shook my head. "Yes, only if a small group is eating, but not if the people from one hundred and nine villages are going to feast," I replied.

He smiled. "You're so smart. I thought you'd be dumb,"

I inhaled deeply. “I’m glad to hear about the changes in your perspective regarding me,” I murmured, and he stared deeply into my eyes for a few moments before responding in a similarly slow tone. “Want to know about any other changes?” he asked.

I sighed, rolled my eyes, and returned to assigning everyone their duties for the day.

Finally, when I finished, I told all the attendees to take a break since no one had slept.

However, I realized Nandani had welcomed her daughter, and we still hadn’t had the sweets.

I watched Prince Agastya leave with a few cooks and attendees toward the storeroom while I took out the pot to make the *Kheer* (Sweet dish).

I tried to avoid looking at the fire. I selected the small stove to prepare the meal for the family. After boiling the rice, I made the Kheer and garnished it with dried fruits. I served five bowls for Ranaji, Nandani, Prince Ranvijay, Princess Aishwarya, and, of course, the youngest Prince, Kunwar Agastya.

I walked into Nandani’s chamber and noticed her sitting with Princess Aishwarya. The baby struggled to latch onto her nipple. She looked hungry, but it seemed difficult for the little princess to grasp her mother’s nipple.

Nandani raised her eyes and watched me approach the plate.

“Since it’s a celebration, we shouldn’t set the sweets aside,” I said, smiling. Princess Aishwarya stood up. “I will take the first bite,” she said excitedly as she picked up the bowl.

I smiled at her, sat beside Nandani, and looked at the baby. Seeing her made me feel I would never experience the feeling of holding my baby in my arms.

Some things are not meant for you.

“She is struggling,” I mumbled, and Nandani nodded, lifting her gaze to meet mine.

“She is. Here, Suman, take your baby in your arms, too. You cared for her better than I did to bring her into this world,” she said as she placed the baby in my hands.

The baby opened her eyes and looked at me, distressed, which made me chuckle. “She craves your scent, Nandani. Children recognize the smell of mother from the womb and seek it immediately after birth,” I said, leaning in to kiss her forehead. “May God bless her with all the greatness and love a girl deserves,” I added, returning her to Nandani.

Nandani once again put the nipple in her mouth and pressed her breasts, as the physician had taught her. Once the baby started tasting, she learned. I smiled, and a tear of joy rolled down my cheek.

"You should rest now, Jiji," Princess Aishwarya said, and Nandani nodded. “I’ll take the bowl for Hukum,” she added, taking one more bowl. I smiled at her as she left.

I set out another bowl for Ranaji next to Nandani’s on the bed and said, “I’ll send Ranaji in.”

Nandani smiled and nodded. “And you should rest too, now,” she said, and I leaned in to kiss her forehead. “You need rest, Ranisa,” I reminded her. She chuckled, realizing the deeper meaning behind my calling her by her title.

I took the plate with the last bowl and left her chamber. On the way, I saw Ranaji talking with the physician and tried to speak. “Ranaji, Ranisa is asking for you,” I informed him, and he smiled. Of course.”

I walked past him when he stopped me. “Suman.”

I turned to face him. “Ji, Ranaji,” I asked. He removed one of the expensive jewels from around his neck and extended his hand toward me. “This is for you,” he said, and I felt a slight shiver run down my spine. Something struck me hard.

Sweat pooled in my palm as I cautiously extended my hand and watched him place the necklace into it.

It felt heavy.

But the reality felt heavier.

For the past few days, I saw myself as more than a maid.

“You took great care of Nandani,” he said. I bit my lower lip, suddenly at a loss for words, and replied, “It’s my job and responsibility.” My voice came out shaky, and he continued, “Also, if you see Agastya, please tell him to let me know before he leaves for anywhere.” I nodded slowly and turned to walk away.

My pace slowed, and my mind felt tense with all the memories and thoughts of the last four years. I was a maid, just a maid. Why had I acted like something more for the previous few days?

I entered Kunwar Agastya’s chamber and attempted to call out, “Kunwar Agastya!”

I waited and heard from the other side, “Come in.”

I took a few steps into the chamber and saw him sitting on his couch in his bedroom, holding rolled letters in his hand with an inkpot beside him. The lamp illuminated his surroundings, although the room’s corners remained dim.

Kneeling, I placed the plate in front of him.

“Did you taste it?” he asked, and I shook my head absentmindedly. My fingers clutched on the beady garland.

“It’s only for royals,” I said. He dipped his finger and sucked the tip, then shook his head. “You forgot to add sugar,” he said.

It wasn’t possible. I shook my head in disbelief. “No, I didn’t,” I countered.

He dipped his finger again and looked at me, pushing his finger closer. “Know yourself,” he offered, and I didn’t know what came to mind. Without a second thought, I tasted it off his finger, and my eyes widened as I realized what I had just done.

What?

“Umm, I’m really… sorry.” I stuttered.

He narrowed his brows with a faint smile. “Ah, Royal, huh?” he teased, and I immediately stood up. I shouldn’t be here. Turning on my heels, I ran away.

"Ayee, Suno." “Ayee, listen.” I heard his faded voice, but I dashed back to my room and closed the door behind me.

I sat on the floor, pulling my knees closer to my chest. As I leaned my face into my knees, I allowed the emotions and memories to flow freely through my mind.

When I married my husband at sixteen, I was a young girl, unaware of what to expect from him. Yet, in the back of my mind, I held an image of him as cheerful, loving, and supportive—someone who would take an interest in nurturing my desire for knowledge. However, day after day, as my clothes were torn from my body, my dreams began to leave my soul.

After three days, I realized that if I lay on my back with my skirt lifted to my waist and my legs apart, the pain would be less. The pain that Nandani always described as pleasure, which I could never relate to. He would come, lie on top of me with his face in the crook of my neck, and start doing what all husbands are supposed to do.

He often told me that, as a wife, keep your husband happy.

And it went on.

Days turned into weeks, and my body got used to it while my expectations faded. I had never been told that I was beautiful, smart, or worth something.

And today, as I held Princess in my hand, a thought crossed my mind: if a girl is to enter this life, she must choose her parents wisely.

Sometimes, he would yell at me. He’d ask me to make sounds for him and at least smile or react to reassure him he was doing well.

However, he was unaware that if a soul is wounded, you cannot fake it.

And I couldn’t either. Tears streamed down my face, and after three months or ninety-two nights without a break, he finally grew tired of me. My stomach ached, and when I could no longer bear it—when my face lost its rosy hue, my berry-like lips faded, my eyes looked hopeless, and I seemed lifeless—he finally left me.

No! Not for my benefit but for his. He deserved better. He deserved someone who could smile, make noise for him, and keep him happy.

Clearly, I could not do it.

Over the past seven years, I had forgotten or moved on from every bit until today, when I realized I once again had a husband—not really a husband! But a husband—a half-husband, though.

But I couldn’t deny that he had rights over me somehow.

The pace and intensity of our interactions changed from before the incident to after, and I was afraid my heart was misinterpreting everything.

I didn’t know how to tell my heart that he was a prince and I was just a maid. Our backgrounds and castes were different, our clans were different, and we were different. He was my savior, and my heart—my foolish heart—was falling for his teasing words.

I didn’t realize it until Ranaji gifted me that necklace. It wasn’t the first time he had given me something expensive. He trusted me and always seemed happy with my work. He had given me gifts on Diwali, Holi, his crowning ceremony, Prince Ranvijay’s wedding, and several other occasions. I always loved receiving appreciation gifts, but it hit me harder this time.

It made me think of the distance between us, particularly the space between Kunwar Agastya and me. I had to hold back any emotions that might arise in my heart to avoid being hurt by them.

I exhaled deeply and crawled under my comforters, accepting his kindness and flirting in another direction. He was just toying with our situation. He had always been this way—never serious, lighthearted, joyful, and cheerful. Nonchalant.

But I hadn’t been that foolish. Had I really been this desperate for the last seven years? A man would start flirting with me, and I would fall for it? Urghhhhh.

Focus. Suman. Focus.

My sleep had been chaotic for some time and not peaceful at all. I hadn’t experienced that in ages.

I couldn’t recall anything from my dreams, but I realized I hadn’t truly slept at all when I woke up.

My head felt heavy, and I immediately tried to get out of bed to bathe. After my bath, I went straight to Nandani’s chamber, only to find that the trio—who had been just two yesterday—was sleeping peacefully: Ranaji, Ranisa, and their little princess.

I began my daily chores by cleaning the chamber and guiding the attendees and maids in the tasks they needed to complete. It

wasn't difficult because, over time, I developed an understanding of what needed to be done, and these attendees shared that awareness; I only needed to supervise them closely.

Reva ran toward me, her beautiful smile conveying the message, "King Abhinandan has arrived from Mahabaleshgarh." I smiled, filled with joy and anxiety about the challenging moment ahead.

Three years ago, because of King Rajvardhan's declining health, the crown was passed to King Abhinandan. However, something unexpected occurred, and King Rajvardhan did not survive. Mahabaleshgarh was still struggling to cope with that loss.

But he was in a better place now. If anyone had seen him in his last days, suffering and gasping for each breath, they would have understood that sometimes it's easier to give up.

Not all wars are meant to be won.

I turned and returned to Nandani's chamber to wake Ranaji and greet him. "Ranaji," I called, standing far from his bed. The curtains were drawn, and I heard his deep, hoarse voice reply, "Suman?"

I lowered my gaze and informed him, "King Abhinandan has arrived at the borders of Suryagarh." He immediately stepped off the bed and nodded at me. "Prepare the guest rooms for everyone," he ordered, and I left the bedroom. I entered the Common Attendees' chamber and moved into the sanitation and cleaning section. I asked a few attendees to join me and briefed them about the guest rooms.

I spent the entire afternoon preparing for the guests and returned to Nandani in the evening.

I looked at *Ranima*, *Daadisa*, and Queen Trisha, who were seated together. "*Pranam, Daadisa*," I said, approaching her and kneeling to touch her feet.

"Ahh, Suman. How are you, my child?" she asked, her warm smile inviting. I smiled back. "I'm good, Daadisa," I replied as she rested her hand on mine, her voice laced with sympathy. "Are you really okay, Suman?" she inquired, and I felt she understood me. I nodded, shifted my gaze to Ranima, and bent down to touch her feet.

"Pranam, Ranima," I said as she wrapped me in a loose hug, gently patting my head. "God bless you, Suman," she replied. I turned to Queen Trisha and joined my hands in respect. "Pranam, Ranisa." She smiled and nodded at me. "Ji, Pranam." I noticed Nandani watching me with suspicion and attempted to say, "Um, I should get something to eat for you." "No need," she responded immediately, and I bit my lower lip, unsure of what to say.

Honestly, she would kill me for hiding the truth, and if she found out from someone else, she'd kill me and then bring me back to life with elixir just to kill me again.

"Um, I had to handle the preparations," I excused myself. I spent the rest of the day in the kitchen overseeing our purchases for the big feast, which was just five days away. I counted everything and assigned tasks to the staff. We will start making ladoos tomorrow.

By the time I finished, it had turned dark, and I felt exhausted. Thankfully, the work kept my mind engaged until I returned to Nandani's chamber to check on her. I saw her sitting on the bed, feeding her baby with great care. Attendees surrounded her, and she lifted her gaze when she spotted me.

"Leave us alone," she said, glancing at the other attendees as I approached her.

I sat on the bed in front of her, and she looked at me with a somewhat tired expression. "Is everything okay, Suman?" she asked. I wasn't sure, but I couldn't lie to anyone except her. She was the one who had always supported me.

I shook my head slowly, trying to express myself. It may have been the right thing to do. It was essential to forget whatever had happened between Kunwar Agastya and me on that cremation ground.

"What happened?" she asked, and I lowered my gaze as I replied, "I lied to you about my visit."

She touched my hand, encouraging me to look at her. "And what was the lie?" she asked.

A single tear rolled down my cheek as I replied, "My husband… he died." In my mind, I vividly pictured my late husband as I spoke, glancing into her eyes, which turned upset.

"Oh my God! How?" she asked, and I shook my head.

"I don't know," I said as she softly laid the baby on the bed and wrapped her arms around me. Are you okay, Suman?" she asked, rubbing my back. I nodded and closed my eyes.

"Yes, who would feel sad for a husband like that?" I said with a slight chuckle. She patted my shoulder, saying, "I hope his family didn't trouble you this time."

I closed my eyes. I didn't know why, but I sensed that revealing it to her would make *it* a reality. Sharing the story of what happened afterward would complicate matters for all three of us. Those two were meant to be together.

"No, they didn't," I lied. She let go of the hug and stared at me, her eyes fixed on mine as she cradled my cheeks. "You are a brave girl."

"Ranisa," an attendee entered, and we both turned to look at her.

"Yes?" Nandani asked, her frustration evident. Although she had already stated her desire for privacy, they had chosen not to grant it to us.

"Ranisa, it's Prince Agastya," the attendee said, and at that moment, my heart raced with exhilaration.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

“We don’t know,” the attendee said, shaking her head. “He asked for dinner, and when we went to serve it, he refused to eat and sent us back. This happened sixteen times. We tried all the dishes, and he rejected everything without even tasting them,” she explained.

I lowered my gaze, feeling a slight knot form in my stomach.

“He asked for dinner and then refused to eat sixteen times. I hope we’re only talking about one night?” Nandani asked, her frustration clear, and the attendee nodded. “Ji, Ranisa.”

She shook her head and muttered, “First Rudra, then this kingdom, and then his brother.”

I bit my lower lip and tried to say, “Umm, I will take care of it.”

She lifted her gaze and exhaled. “Yes, please ask him what he wants to eat, and if he’s still acting the same, let Rudra know. I don’t have the energy to deal with his wicked games right now,” she said, and I stood up from the bed.

Taking a deep breath, I walked toward the kitchen and asked them to prepare a plate for him with all his favorite foods, reminding myself: ONE LAST TIME!

She rushed out of my chamber.

A wave of suspicion and regret coursed through my nerves. Did I do something wrong? Was she okay? When she brought the dinner, her face appeared slightly pale and confused. Despite feeling a ton of happiness, she seemed a bit off. Perhaps she was tired, or maybe something was wrong.

I couldn't guess.

But yes, her expression changed when she tasted the sweet. I furrowed my brows and lowered my gaze to the bowl. Dipping my finger again, I tasted it. It was more than perfect.

Then what happened to her?

She appeared happy when we made the list together in the kitchen. However, her expression changed when she arrived here.

I hoped someone was not bothering her. Perhaps her dead husband's family attempted to reach out to her.

Leaping from my couch, I hurried toward the Authority of Letters. I requested copies of all the letters we received last week. Despite reviewing each one, nothing appeared suspicious.

So what was she worried about? Was it about me talking to her?

She didn't seem unhappy while talking to me; she only appeared irritated, which I liked because it distracted her from the past. Now she was doing better. She seemed more engaged in her work and didn't need me as much. My teasing and irritation also distanced her from me, which was actually beneficial for her.

At that moment, a relationship was the most harmful thing for her. Thus, I perceived my disloyal reputation and flirting as somewhat useful. This meant that if she continued to get annoyed with me, she wouldn't develop feelings for me.

However, something felt really off about her today.

I returned from the Authority of Letters and lay on my bed, trying to sleep. However, I couldn't, as thoughts of her battles and struggles swirled in my mind. I meant a woman who had been forced, then abandoned, and not truly allowed to live happily. How could anyone expect her to forget and be happy so easily?

No matter how much you run, a part of your past always runs behind you.

I palmed my face, unable to catch sleep, and finally gave up.

After taking a quick bath, I started writing letters to all the guests for the baby's sixth-day feast. However, in the back of my mind, I couldn't shake the image of that day when she was crying in my arms and then her rigidity to live as a normal woman. It just wouldn't leave my mind, and it was hindering me.

After finishing the letters, I stepped outside to check on the preparations. Yet, unconsciously, my eyes searched for her. In the kitchen, I scanned all the women: short frame, wheatish skin, wavy curly hair, a big smile, beautiful red lips, a mole on her right cheek, and another on the left side of her neck. She wore two red bangles on each wrist, had a tiny waist with a slight belly, and would show her frustration at noticing me nearby.

But as the sun sank below the horizon, the winds turned chilly, the insects emerged, and the birds returned to their nests, but I could not find her.

With each passing moment, my heart beat a little faster at the thought of all the potential things that might have happened to her, rendering her unavailable.

What if she got hurt, sick, tense, depressed, or crying? Oh no! No, no… that couldn't happen.

As evening descended, I returned to my chamber. Rubbing my face, I sank into the couch and pondered ways to find her.

Did she go to visit her family? Still, there was no letter.

Suddenly, a thought popped into my mind, and I clapped twice. An attendee walked in, and I looked at her. "I want dinner," I said, and she nodded before leaving me.

She would come now.

I reminded myself to take a quick bath and change into my night clothes: a simple long loincloth and a loose white kurta. After my bath, I settled back onto the couch and began waiting once more.

However, time appears to move more slowly now.

I gazed at my dagger impatiently, beginning to draw it from the sheath only to push it back in. My eyes studied it intently, yet my mind remained fixated on the image of her face I had seen just before she fled.

When I heard footsteps approaching, I immediately lifted my gaze to the entrance. A slight smile appeared on my face, but as soon as I saw an attendee, I felt an unfamiliar ache in my heart.

"Prince, dinner."

"Take it back," I replied faster than I anticipated, glancing at the puzzled attendee retrieving the plate.

I bit my lower lip in confusion. Maybe she was busy and didn't realize I had asked for dinner, so she didn't come. I stood up and pulled out a book to pass the time. I started with the first word of each page and promised myself that I would call for dinner when I finished the first page.

I started reading, but I was hardly focused. I managed to finish the page and then clapped again.

Another attendee arrived. "I want dinner now," I requested, remaining polite, as I had already been rude to someone else.

She bent down and nodded before leaving.

After trying to concentrate for a while, I noticed footsteps. I gulped and looked toward the entrance, and as soon as I saw the face, I sighed in frustration.

I will kill you today. Half wife.

"Take it back, I'm not hungry," I blunt, and the attendee looked at me with a confused and scared expression. "But, Pr—"

"Really, I'm not hungry," I insisted, and she turned to take it back.

Fine! This time, I would read five pages. I sat down on the couch and immersed myself in the next five. As soon as I finished the last word of the fifth page, I clapped twice. An attendee approached. "I want dinner," I stated again. She nodded before leaving.

But as soon as I saw an unfamiliar face again, I smashed my head on the book.

"Take it back," I said again. My inner conscience growled in frustration.

Ten pages this time. I read and finished. I called an attendee for dinner, but *she* didn't come again. I sent her away. Another twenty pages, another attendee, not her, again; fifty pages, dinner, still not her, again. I didn't realize it then, but I had become frustrated and angry, and now I was truly hungry. I had lost track of how many times I had called them. Finally, I finished the book and clapped once more.

An attendee arrived, her face pale. I tried to speak in a slow, soothing voice. "Dinner, please." She gulped, and I sensed her nervousness and fear. "Ji," she nodded and walked away. I stood up and walked.

Where the hell are you? Sumanika Ji, my half-wife.

After sitting on the bed, I lay back and closed my eyes. One knee was bent up, while the other rested across the edge of the bed. My heart raced, and a slight uneasiness churned in my stomach. Honestly, I was just worried about her health. That was it.

As I heard a faint sound of footsteps, I quickly lifted my head slightly to glance at the entrance. My eyes fell on *her*, and I let out a sigh of relief. Thank you, God!

She appeared pale in her simple yellow outfit. Her eyes looked tired as I observed her walking toward the table to place the plate down. "Your dinner," she said. I sat up to look at her. "What took you so long?" I asked, and she turned her furrowed brows at me. "For what?" she asked.

She knew the answer. "For bringing me dinner."

She momentarily lowered her gaze and said, "There are other attendees as well, Kunwarsa. You didn't stay hungry if someone else served you in the last four years. What changed?" She questioned me.

I gritted my teeth. "I wanted to see you." I kept my words and intentions direct as I stood up from the bed and approached her.

Her eyes met mine, and I noticed the distance between us shrink. She swallowed hard and blinked quietly before responding in a slow voice, "Since when did a prince start wanting to see a maid?"

Her words wounded me. She sounded upset and rude. "Are you okay?" I asked.

She flickered her gaze and nodded. "I'm absolutely fine. What would happen to me?"

I couldn't help but gently cup her cheek. Her body stiffened. "Hey," I said, pulling her closer for a hug. She resisted. "I'm sorry about the bet."

Her breathing quickened as I gently pulled her face to my chest. I couldn't help but lean in to kiss the top of her head. "I'm truly sorry for hurting you."

She shook her head. "You didn't hurt me." Her voice became heavy and teary.

"Then tell me who hurt you," I asked, angling her face to look at me.

"I hurt myself," she replied.

Shaking my head slowly, I asked, "What do you mean?"

She stepped away from me. "You care about me," she said. "And no man has ever cared about me. Despite how my heart has hardened, I can't convince myself that this isn't real. This can't happen. The way you keep pulling me back to you hurts… it hurts, Kunwarsa; please don't do this." A tear rolled down her cheek.

My heart felt heavy. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I promise," I tried to explain, and she nodded, wiping her tears. "I know you never wanted to hurt me, but please understand you're committed to someone else. You shouldn't worry about me, and I shouldn't mistake your care for something more—my savior." She said, taking a few steps away from me.

I didn't know what came over me as I held her hand and pulled her back toward me. Our chests collided, and I made her look at me. Her eyes widened. "You don't have to worry about my marriage," I said.

She stared silently at me. "And?" she asked, trying to push me away. "Do you want me to become the person I've hated all my life? A second woman?" Her voice was weak and painful.

I shook my head. "Trust me," a weight tightened my chest. "You are not second."

"Of course," she breathed deeply. "I'm not second. Maybe third, fourth, tenth, fiftieth, hundredth, three hundred—"

"Stop."

My heart raced as my face inched closer to her lips. I clenched my fingers, watching her eyes fill with fear and her lips

quiver from our proximity.

She looked into my eyes and gulped nervously.

My gaze felt heavy as it fell to her lips. I blinked, struggling to gauge the consequences. The burden of everything except her lifted from my mind as I leaned in even closer.

Her breathing quickened, and she shook her head with shivers. I squeezed my eyes shut, biting my lip in a futile attempt at self-control.

“I want to go, Kunwarsa.” She said, sniveling.

I frightened her.

Closing my eyes, I couldn’t stop gently kissing the tip of her nose. “Just do whatever you want. But be happy an—”

“I want to go,” she cut me off, pushing me away.

I stood frozen in place and watched her sprint away from me.

Fuck! Fuckkkkkkkkk! Urghhhhhhhhhhh!

I felt my hand being held and suddenly pulled. My chest collided with his, and my heart began to pound even louder. My cheeks flushed even more as I felt his hand cup my cheek and lift my face to meet his gaze.

His eyes had beautiful, thick, curled lashes like his hair. The green of his eyes had turned into a sad version of green, resembling an ocean awaiting the moon to let its waves play freely. His cheeks had turned a shade of red, along with his dark pink lips.

I could feel his breath fanning over my face as he spoke. “You don’t have to worry about my marriage.” His words pierced through me, and I swallowed the lump in my throat while trying to respond.

“And? You want me to become the person I’ve hated all my life? A second woman?”

I could feel his breath growing heavier, his voice thickening as he slightly shook his head. “Trust me… you’re not second,”

It was so easy for him to attract anyone, and I was being completely foolish here. “Of course, I am not second. Maybe third, fourth, tenth, fiftieth, hundredth, three hundred—”

“Stop,” he muttered, and I could see his lips leaning closer. His grip tightened around my wrist. The words hung in my throat as I battled my lashes to resist giving in.

Another moment with him, and I would lose the battle of seven years.

My breaths started breaking, and I pressed my lips together to prevent them from quivering in his support. The softness I felt upon the touch of his lips on mine dripped down his lips, which were just an inch away.

I lifted my gaze and looked into his eyes, which flickered between my lips and my own. He blinked slowly and silently, his lips slightly parted. I froze as he leaned even closer. My lashes felt heavy, and I tried to shake my head.

This was wrong. This was profoundly wrong. I could never forgive myself if he cheated on his fiancée with me.

I couldn’t be that woman; I couldn’t stand as an enemy to another woman.

He closed his eyes and restrained himself by biting his lip.

"I want to go, Kunwarsa," I hesitated, my voice broken and breaths shaky.

My eyes met his as he looked back at me, and I could see the care evident in his gaze. Slowly, he leaned in closer and pressed his lips to the tip of my nose.

My lashes fluttered shut, and for a moment, I felt at home. I felt unbothered, unburdened, and cared for. It was as if time slowed down.

For the first time in my life, I felt this from a man. A man named Agastya Dev Singh, the most charming, handsome, and intelligent prince of Suryagarh.

“Just do whatever you want. But be happy, an-“

"I want to go," but he seemed committed. I shook my head and pushed him away.

I shouldn’t be here. What if his future wife discovered our relationship? I couldn’t be counted among the many women he has history with?

There seemed to be no clear reason for his actions other than attraction. I walked away and went to my room, shutting the door behind me.

The temperature rose around me. I could feel the heat in my cheeks and body, and sweat formed on my palms. I tried to place my hand on my heart, attempting to calm it down.

I rolled into the comforters and hid myself. The vision of him closer to me was clearer than reality. My future was also clearer than reality. I couldn’t stay away from him and control myself around him.

The emotions I had always considered dead and buried were awakening, reminding me that a woman resides within me who needs to be cherished by a man.

The Man. He was the Man. A Man.

For the last four years, I had never felt this way about him. But then, why did it change suddenly?

My head spun with his thoughts, and the one that prompted me to push my comforters off my face was the thought of completing that kiss.

What would happen if he kissed me? What was I even thinking?

No, he shouldn’t come near me. That was wrong. Society would never accept this.

But he drew closer. I felt my back press against his chest, his lips near my ear. My breathing grew heavy. His finger brushed my arm, sending shivers of anticipation through me. His chest felt warm against my almost bare back.

I felt him leaning into my neck. My lashes closed tightly, and a slight wetness formed in my core. It was wrong, but it felt good. The touch didn’t burn me. The voice didn’t bite me. And the softness made me feel cared for.

I pressed my thighs together. We were on the bed, and he smiled at my struggle. Placing his hand on my thighs, he parted them, shaking his head. ‘Only me,’

His words made me feel even hotter, and I turned to face him and sat in his lap. I felt his hardness against me, and it thrilled me. ‘Kunwar Agastya,’ I murmured, kissing his cheek, and in that instant, I opened my eyes.

I quickly glanced around and straightened up.

What in the world was I dreaming about? And why?

I shook my head in disbelief. How could I dream about him? I quickly covered my face, struggling to breathe.

Suman, you've become a problem. He isn't the problem. You are the problem. You're getting turned on. And after seven years? For him?

Suddenly, I felt the bright sunlight on my face and immediately looked toward the window. It was well past morning.

Ugh, no! Let me handle one thing at a time.

A grand feast awaited in the Kingdom, and I was sleeping in late.

I immediately threw away the comforter and walked toward the common bathing room for attendees. At this time, it was empty. Typically, we attendees would remove our clothes and wrap ourselves in cotton fabric to take a bath together. However, some attendees were very confident about their bodies, so they went naked, like older women.

I wrapped the fabric around my body and stepped into the pool, which was now filled with dirty water since everyone had bathed. However, I let it go, and after emerging from the pool, I used a bucket of clean water to change into my plain clothes.

But today, I chose to be real. I removed my leftover bangles, nose rings, and toe rings. In our tribe, wearing vermilion was optional, but the toe and nose rings were the main ornaments for married women.

I needed to accept this, and additionally, Kunwarsa needed to accept it as well.

Taking a deep breath, I walked toward Nandani's chamber. Upon entering, I found her sitting with her Daadisa.

"*Pranam, Daadisa*," I wished, bending down to receive her blessings. She placed her hand on my head and held my wrist, encouraging me to sit beside her. "How are you, Suman?" she asked in her weak, old voice, and I smiled, rubbing her hand. "I am good, Daadisa,"

"You called me Bhabhisa," his voice suddenly captured my attention and sent butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

"Ji, Devarsa, come here," Nandani invited, and I heard his footsteps approaching. I glanced at him as he settled on the other side of the bed with Nandani.

"I was thinking of taking you with me for a while. You'll feel better," Daadisa said, catching my attention as I heard Nandani ask him, "What happened to you last night? Why were you acting so childish?"

I gulped nervously, feeling my palms sweat.

"You will come with me, right, Suman? You're our child now. I want you to get married and settle down in a loving family. I have someone in mind," Daadisa said with a smile, and my smile faded from my face.

Did she really have to say all of this in front of him?

I tried to shake my head, but then he suddenly burst out laughing. "Um, Bhabhisa, actually, no one knew what I wanted to eat, and I wanted to teach them a lesson. So, I kept sending them back until they brought me what I love," he said, and I could feel my stomach twisting at that moment.

"Tell me, Suman. You're getting married, right?" Daadisa asked, shaking me. I tried to nod absentmindedly but noticed Nandani twisting his ear. "How can you act like this when your Bhabhisa just laid an offspring? Couldn't you eat what they made for just one day?"

He screamed in pain for a moment and shook his head. "Ouch, sorry Bhabhisa. I'm really sorry; I won't do that again," his voice sounded cute, and I couldn't believe that his cuteness wasn't as charming in my dreams.

My cheeks grew warm as I glanced at Daadisa, who was still waiting for my answer. I gulped nervously. "Ji, Ji, Daadisa. Whatever you want," I said in a slow voice, hoping he wouldn't hear.

"By the way, I want to see my papaya," he said, leaning forward to look at the baby. I guess he hadn't even noticed me.

"Oh my God, she's beautiful… but she's so tiny. Are you sure it's Bhaisa's?" he asked, and Nandani immediately punched his bicep. "Don't you dare, Stupid!"

He laughed and leaned in to kiss the baby's feet. "I will make you the most spoiled princess this world has ever known," he said, but suddenly Daadisa interrupted. "What about the princess you're marrying, Kunwarsa? How will you spoil her?"

I sensed the teasing tone in her words and immediately lowered my face, wanting to escape from her.

He laughed, gently touching the baby's cheek, and said, "You are too old to know about it, Daadisa."

Nandani interrupted, "Ayee, she is not old."

He laughed again and looked at us. His gaze lingered on me for a moment before he spoke. "Then I can tell you,"

I quickly glanced at Daadisa and said, "Um, I need to go, Daadisa. I must see the kitchen."

She didn't even hear me as I slowly escaped, listening to his voice fade away. "I will teach her how to use the dagger wisely. You know it's a journey of self-discovery,"

Nandani laughed loudly. Daadisa chuckled too, but I didn't understand what was funny. I never quite understood Nandani and his jokes; their bond was deep, like that of best friends.

I walked out of her room and tried to step outside. However, before I could, someone grabbed me and pinned me against the wall. I quickly glanced around before turning to look at him.

"Kunwarsa," I gasped. "Someone will see us,"

He quickly untied the curtain from the pillar, letting it cover both of us. "Not now," he said. Frustration ran through my

nerves. “I want to talk to you,” he continued.

I shook my head, trying to push him away.

“Ayyeee, don’t!” His warning only provoked me to push him harder.

However, as I tried to walk past him, he grabbed my hand and pulled me closer. A wave of pain shot through my hand when he twisted my arm behind my back, dragging me precariously nearer to him.

My eyes widened with shock.

"I am talking to you," He said.

My whole body shivered with his strength, and I gazed into his eyes with a trace of fear. “Kunwarsa,” I muttered.

He gulped, gently loosening his hold while leaving my hand. “Why did you take it off?” he asked, studying my face, and I shook my head. “What?”

“Your nose ring,” he said.

I was stunned. “Because my husband died. It’s only for married women,” I reminded him.

He took a step closer, pushing me against the wall. I felt smaller next to him.

"You have a husband," He spoke.

I shook my head. “No, I don’t,” I replied immediately. “The world doesn’t know about it,” I added in a low voice.

His eyes sharpened, and his slightly tighter grip made my wrist feel numb. His cologne enveloped the air like a drug, as his presence occupied a significant space in my life.

“But you know about it, don’t you?” he said as I gazed at his face, leaning in closer. My cheeks flushed, and I felt suffocated, trapped in his embrace. I attempted to lean back, trying to create some distance between us, but as he drew me nearer, my weight shifted onto my toes, and my eyes widened in astonishment.

“Be a good wife to me,” he muttered.

My stomach twisted. His lips moved closer to mine. I turned my face away, trying to resist my sinful surrender.

“Ayeh,” he breathed, wrapping his other hand around my shoulder and cupping my jaw with his large hand, forcing me to meet his gaze.

My lips quivered and parted as I huffed. He drew nearer, and I could feel our breaths mingling against each other’s lips.

I couldn’t help but give in; I felt too weak to struggle. To my surprise, he kissed the tip of my nose and murmured, “I need to go for a day. I want you to keep my dagger with you.”

His words prompted me to open my eyes and regard him with furrowed brows. “Where and why?” my lips muttered, and he smiled.

“That’s like how you ought to question your husband,” he said, and I gritted my teeth a bit.

“Half husband,” I reminded him. He smirked slightly, loosened my hand, and leaned in closer, bringing his lips near my ear.

"Jitno tum ho na uske liye hum aadhe hi Kaafi hai,"

“My half is sufficient for all of you,” he said, his dagger brushing my cheek. It felt cold against my skin as he gazed into my eyes.

“It’s not serious between my fiancé and me.” Suddenly, his words shattered my world, and I stood frozen. But before I could react or ask anything, he stepped away from me, leaving me with his dagger in hand, unsure of how to deal with it.

“See you tomorrow, *dinner*,”

Agastya

After meeting her, I returned to my chamber. Today presented an excellent opportunity to learn about Mehrangarh's plans. However, one thing—only one thing—filled me with terror.

I glanced at Eklavya as he waited for me. "How did it go?" he asked.

I furrowed my brow. "What?" I asked while walking with him to the entrance.

"The secret affair," he teased, and I glared at him. However, I couldn't help sharing. "She hates me,"

"Why?" He placed his hand on my shoulder.

I took a deep breath and looked in his direction. "Bad reputation,"

He smiled, "Interesting."

I let out a deep sigh and mounted my horse. I didn't mention this to anyone, but I felt I should share it with her.

"Are things getting spicier?" he inquired as he mounted his horse while I glanced his way.

"Can you tell me what spice is going on in Mehrangarh?" I redirected his question, and he chuckled. He had come here early in the morning to join our mission.

"Nothing, just the letter exchanges," He informed.

We rode toward the famous Mehrangarh brothel. Last night, Eklavya sent me a letter informing me that the head commander of Mehrangarh would arrive tonight. I had already sent a few of my spies there.

"Agastya," Eklavya said, catching my attention, "I don't understand why she's marrying you. If she loves someone else, why can't she simply be with him?"

"Because she doesn't have options. She can't tell anyone about her condition, and when it comes to men, she can't trust anyone. However, she feels safe with me," I answered.

He furrowed his brows. "What is her condition?" he asked.

I shook my head. "I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone," I said. He asked, "So, she knows you're plotting against her kingdom?"

"No," I answered, "She thinks I am helping her with good intentions."

He inhaled deeply. "You're going to break a heart," he said.

I gulped, the old memories silently washing over. "This world is cruel," I said. "It only cares about when you are going to break someone's heart. No one cares when they're tearing you to pieces,"

He raised his eyebrows and replied, "But I genuinely hope you provide her with something more meaningful than just a hollow relationship as a wife."

I chuckled and glanced at him. "We can marry only once. There's no chance."

"You're a gone game," he laughed at me and blurted out after a few moments of silence, "You know, sometimes I think you went to kill her husband."

I immediately looked in his direction. "Are you mad?" I asked, and he laughed a little.

But God knew.

"She's actually sweet," I said, and he smiled. "What else?"

I smiled, thinking about her. "She is strong. She doesn't care that I'm a prince. If she has something to say, she'll say it," I told him, and he teased me a bit.

"Oooooohh, strong, hnn. Let's see how strong she will feel after learning about your dirty games," he teased.

My smile vanished. "She will never accept me, Eklavya," I exclaimed. "She already sees me as disloyal and a fuckboy, and I know that if she ever finds out what kind of things I've done, she will be disgusted by me."

We both entered the forest.

"Don't tell her then," he exclaimed.

I shook my head. "I don't know. I'm messed up and confused. At some point, everyone will find out about us, and I know that after this thing with Mehrangarh, Rashmika will back out. But I don't want her to feel trapped with me just because we are connected. For that, she needs to know what she wants to choose. I'm just waiting for the right moment," I explained.

"Agastya, ensure the right time arrives before you both fall hard for each other; otherwise, it will hurt her greatly."

I nodded. "I know,"

We continued talking, and the day almost ended. We were just a mile away from where we both needed to be.

"Do you know who he is?" I asked, looking at Eklavya.

He nodded. "But he might have seen me at Mehrangarh, so we both need to stay away from him," he said.

I nodded. "Let's stop here," I said, aiming at a tree. We both dismounted our horses. After tying them up, we changed into plain black kurtas with *Pathani* bottoms and wrapped turbans around our heads, using the loose ends to cover our faces.

They would see us as foreigners.

"Here, apply this," he said, and I took the small box. As I opened it, I chuckled. "You brought kohl," I remarked, taking a little on my index finger and applying it to my eyes. They wouldn't recognize us at all now.

He also smudged his eyes, and we walked toward the brothel.

Nothing stupid, Agastya. You have a wife.

I reminded myself as we entered. Noticing the dim lighting and girls wearing revealing clothes, I inhaled deeply. The smell of alcohol and intoxication hung thick in the air. The deal felt substantial.

I signaled to Eklavya, and we both went our separate ways as we entered. I scanned the area for a familiar face and spotted Kalsi, whom I had known for a long time. I walked toward her.

She was a formidable woman when it came to men. She had the ability to bring any man to his knees, but there was one issue: she did not accept money.

I inhaled deeply and walked over to her. She sat quietly on a small couch, and I sat beside her. “How are you?” I asked, looking at her.

She looked at me with a hint of surprise. After a few moments, she recognized me. “Agastya,” a wide smile spread across her face as she stood up, took my hand and guided us through the crowd into a quiet space bedroom.

I glanced at a mattress on the floor. A lamp hung on the wall as I sat down.

“Do you want something to drink?” she asked, and I shook my head in refusal. “I need you to do something for me,”

She smiled broadly and closed the door. I clenched my fist and looked at her, lying beside me with her elbow supporting her head.

“Of course; where have you been for three years?” she asked, and I replied, attempting to ignore her as she hiked her skirt up to her thighs. “Busy,” I said, feeling her hand brush against my arm.

“What do you mean? I heard your brother has become the King of Suryagarh. That makes you a prince now,” she said, and I looked at her with a fixed smile.

“It’s just Agastya for you, and I’m in a bit of a hurry,” I said as she stepped closer.

“What's the hurry? Kunwar Aga—”

“Shhhhh.” I quickly hushed her, not wanting her to finish. I was relishing those two words from just one person.

Her expression changed. “What’s happening?” she inquired.

I bit my lip. “The head commander of Mehrangarh is visiting this place. I want you to know how he plans to use that gray powder,” I said, and she furrowed her brow.

“Elaborate,” she requested.

I explained, “They are making gray powder, and I suspect they intend to use it in a war against Suryagarh. Therefore, I want you to find out how they will use it.” I explained, clearly not being truthful, and she nodded.

“Okay, consider it done,” she agreed. “But what about my prize?” Her tone made me gulp, and I attempted to negotiate: “Any amount.”

Chuckling softly, she shook her head. “I have plenty of *amounts*.” her eyes stared intensely into mine. “How about a night?”

I knew this would happen, so I just smiled and shook my head. “No, I’m swamped right now,” I said, and he cupped my cheek, making me look at her.

“In what?” her tone was brutal. “Fucking your wife? Are you married now?” She asked. The rage and jealousy dripped her tongue.

I shook my head. “No, are you mad?” I grinned feignedly, “Not this time, but maybe another time,” and proposed.

Her jaw tightened, yet she smiled, luring me by her hand to my waist. “What about your dagger? I'm sure it’s not tired,”

“I lost it,” I replied, and she clenched her jaw.

“You lost your dagger? How is that even possible?” she asked, and I tried to avoid upsetting her, knowing she was the only one who could resolve this without complicating.

“Umm, I need your help.”

“Of course,” she replied, standing up.

“Just wait here. Is he the tall, rugged one with the long beard?” she asked, and I nodded. “Yes, that’s him,”

She walked out of the door, and I immediately palmed my face.

I am visiting this place for the very last time. I promise.

After some time, she returned. I observed her entering with two glasses in her hands. Sitting down, she passed a glass to me.

I tried denying it, shaking my head.

“It’s fruit juice,” she said, and I took it.

“What did he say?” I asked, and she sipped to rinse her mouth before me. After spitting into the corner, she spoke. “That bastard came into my mouth.”

Because of my mother, I have always had a soft spot for women in the skin business.

“I’m sorry about that,”

“Don’t apologize,” she said, “but you can stay tonight.” Her voice held intense sensuality.

I chuckled, saying, “Maybe another time.” I didn’t want to upset her, as she was a complicated and generally short-tempered person.

“What did he say?” I asked again, sipping my juice.

“Umm,” she smiled. “He said he would use that for explosions. Like it would be filled in balls, and when they are fired, they explode and kill on a massive scale.”

I took another sip. “How do I fire them?” I asked.

She shook her head. “He is smart. He didn’t explain much, but he mentioned something huge, as large as a mature elephant calf. However, he said that no one understands the design… yes, something like that,” she explained.

I took another sip, nodding. “Okay, thank you so much,” I said, placing a pouch filled with gold coins before her.

Just as I was about to stand up, I began to feel hot.

“Umm-umm. I told you, a night is all I need,” she said, and I immediately gazed at the glass.

“What did you give me?” my voice loud and enraged.

She touched my cheek. “Nothing you can’t handle.”

I tossed it aside and glanced at her. “Are you out of your mind?” My body felt feverish, and sweat beads formed on my forehead.

“Come on, don’t act like a coward. It’s not as if you’re a saint,” she yelled, and anger filled me. I quickly grabbed her neck and pushed her down beneath me.

“Exactly,” I roared. “I am not a saint, nor am I that old Agastya. You stupid woman.” standing up immediately, I intended to head home. I needed to be close to her, not anyone else.

As I walked out, I could see the blurry images of naked women and hear their sensual voices. I covered my ears. Trying to focus on my breathing, I rushed toward my horse. It was hurting a great deal.

As I mounted, I asked him to speed up and take me home, removing my turban to allow the cool air to soothe my head and calm my nerves.

Her vision clouded my sight, and I shook my head. “No, not like this,” I cursed under my breath and rode back home.

It was past midnight by the time I arrived. I quickly dismounted my horse and rushed into my chamber.

As soon as I walked in, I took off my kurta. The heat overwhelmed me. My veins stood out more prominently on my skin, and I felt as if I would explode. My eyes became hot and watery.

Suddenly, my gaze fell on her as she entered my chamber late at night, gazing at me with worry and confusion.

“Kunwarsa, what happened?” she asked, and I stamped back a few paces from her.

“Not now…not now,”

Her face appeared frightened as she moved closer to me and examined my expression.

“Go back,”

“But what happened? Are you okay? Do you have a fever?” she asked, and I couldn’t help myself. “I said, go back,”

She visibly shivered at my raised voice, and I noticed a tear slipping down her cheek.

“Please, go back,” I requested in a slow voice, already feeling out of control. My fists clenched as she ran away. I fell to my knees.

Lying on the cold floor, the chill soothed my bare back as I tried to calm my breathing, but it didn’t work.

Finally, I stood up quickly, undid my pants, and walked into my bathroom naked. I sat in the pool until the last ounce of heat left my body.

Suman

"Go back, please," his words tightened my chest, and I stepped away from him. But he looked worried—not just worried, but troubled and unwell. What was wrong with him, and why was he wearing black clothes and kohl around his eyes?

Had he been somewhere? Why was he so hot? It seemed like he had a fever.

It was early morning, and I had woken up because of the racing thoughts in my mind. I sensed something was amiss when I saw him nearly sprinting to his chamber.

After following him, I realized that something was indeed very wrong.

But he threw me out of his chamber.

Since then, I had helped the maids in the kitchen, yet he still hadn't called for breakfast. It was nearly afternoon now. I felt worried because he had given me that black thread the other day, and now it was missing from his hand.

I tried to focus on watching the maids make ladoos, but my mind was preoccupied with him. I just wanted to know if he was okay. I knew he wouldn't tell me unless something was wrong. He had been tough on me lately, but he cared. It wasn't as if he hated me or didn't want to see me. If he hated me, why would he meet with me before leaving the kingdom? Not just leaving but handing me his dagger.

Yes! I should return his dagger. He asked me to keep it safe, so I quickly stood up, went to my room, grabbed it, and brought it to his chamber.

As I walked in, silence engulfed me. I attempted to call out "Kunwarsa,"

The chamber was dark; all the curtains were drawn, blocking the sunlight. No attendants were present.

I narrowed my gaze at his bedroom curtains, and a knot tightened in my stomach. I hadn't seen him with Nandani or Ranaji since this morning.

"Kunwar Agastya," I called again, but he didn't respond. I just wanted to check if he was okay since he hadn't seemed well the night before. I couldn't help but pull back the bedroom curtains and peek inside.

I felt increasingly anxious now.

Nervously gulping, I walked inside and glanced at his bed, which was draped with curtains. "Kunwarsa," I called softly again, trying not to draw anyone's attention to the fact that I was in his chamber when I shouldn't be.

He didn't respond, prompting me to move closer to him. The afternoon was getting late, and he rarely slept for this long.

I parted the bed's curtains and gazed at him—half-naked and covered only to his waist with a duvet with his chest facing the bed.

The view made me bite my lower lip as I blinked nervously. Walking to the side of the bed, I noticed his closed eyes and steady breathing. His hair fell across his forehead, and his lips looked redder.

"Kunwarsa," I called again.

Leaning in, I touched his forehead with my fingers to check his temperature.

He opened his eyes wide, catching me off guard. Inhaling deeply, he looked at me from tip to toe, and his gaze softened with surprise before calming down and closing his eyes again.

"Are you okay?" I asked, and he nodded slightly. His green eyes, accentuated with kohl, were mesmerizing, and the tan of his skin made my cheeks flush, reminding me of the warmth he radiated.

"I came to return your dagger," I said, placing it beside him.

He gazed at me silently, prompting me to step back and consider leaving.

"Suno," "Listen," he called, and I turned to look back at him. "Stay," he demanded, and I bit my lower lip.

"If I will, you'll say you asked me to stay because I wanted to."

He inhaled deeply and lazily extended his hand, asking for mine. I gulped nervously, unsure of what to do. My mind insisted this was wrong, but my heart wanted to surrender and stay. "For me," he whispered, his gaze locking onto mine as he brushed my finger. A slight tingling sensation coursed through my stomach as he cradled my hand and drew me closer.

Slowly. Very slowly.

I sat nervously on the edge of the bed, my legs dangling down, watching him move closer to me. As he shifted, the comforter slipped, and I accidentally caught a glimpse of the lower curve of his back. "You're naked," I scoffed, looking at him as he brought his forehead nearer to my hip's side.

"That's fine; you won't be disappointed. " His words made me smile slightly, and I realized he was simply Kunwarsa Agastya—unapologetically, Agastya Dev Singh, who doesn't care.

I felt the rough texture of his hand intertwining with mine. Butterflies erupted in my stomach as I noticed the slight cracks on his fingertips, which had healed considerably since the day I found him with the mortar and that gray powder. "Kunwarsa, are you really okay?" I asked in a serious tone. "I mean, if you feel like sharing," I added.

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath before gently shaking his head. Overcome with emotion, I gazed at his face and squeezed his hand tightly, asking, "What's wrong?"

In that instant, I lost track of our roles. I overlooked the existence of a world beyond these drawn curtains—just him and me.

“I went to a… brothel last night,” he interrupted the silence, triggering a sudden tightness in my chest and a dryness in my throat. The words hung in my throat as I struggled to ask, “Did you cheat on your fiancé?”

After a brief pause, he shook his head and murmured, “I’m sorry about last night. I did not intend to raise my voice at you.”

“I know,” I replied, but the word ‘brothel’ occupied my thoughts. “Why did you go to the brothel, then?” he asked as he moved closer.

“Will you promise to keep this between us?” he asked, and I swallowed nervously.

"Yes," I agreed in a slow voice.

“I suspect that Mehrangarh is conspiring against us, and its chief commander possesses vital information. Last night, he visited the brothel, and I went there to gather that information,” he said.

I furrowed my brows. “But you’re marrying the Princess of Mehrangarh, and the commander must have seen you. Didn’t he recognize you?” I tried to ask, but he shook his head.

“I couldn’t meet him directly. I sent an old frie… I mean, someone I know, to him, and she got this information for me,”He said, his thumb gently caressing the back of my hand.

I bit my lower lip and tried to speak in a slow, calculated voice, “Someone you know means a girl, and you know her because you have a history with her?”

He opened his kohl-rimmed eyes and gave me a slight nod.

“Oh, so you have feelings for her?” I asked again, and he shook his head. “No, I’ve met her only a few times before,” he added.

I blinked silently for a moment and asked again, “So what happened then?”

He squeezed my hand gently and closed his eyes, hiding his face like a baby. “Ummm,” he mumbled. “I asked her to get that information, and she asked me to sleep with her in return,”

I felt a slight lump in my throat at this revelation. “So, you slept with her?” I asked slowly.

But to my surprise, he shook his head. “No, I denied it, so she asked me to fuck her with my dagger,” he spoke, and I felt a knot in my stomach; the words hung in my throat.

“But you left your dagger with me. How can you… I mean, how do you do that with your dagger?” I asked, watching him gulp. I could see his Adam’s apple move in his throat as he swallowed.

“Yes, because I didn’t want to be involved with anyone,” he said. “But she drugged me with something to make me lose control and heighten my desire, you know,”

I felt my palm growing colder with his words. “So, you…” I couldn’t say anything, so I simply stared at him. He shook his head while gazing back at me.

“That’s why I asked you to go back yesterday,” he said.

I inhaled, realizing the gravity of the situation. “Oh,” I said, trying to calm my pounding heart and continued. “But you didn’t have to do it. I mean, Mehrangarh is close to you. You could have gone to your fiancé. Bearing that drug would have been difficult. She could have hel… helped you,” I cleared my throat slightly, looking at him.

He turned around, staring back at me with no emotion. “You’re stupid,” he drawled.

I gulped silently, lowering my gaze. “Am I?” I muttered, straightening up and locking eyes with him.

I didn’t, but I could feel my cheeks heating up under his gaze, and my mind was flooded with the memory of seeing him half-naked in my dream.

“So, are you still under the influence of drugs? Am I in trouble?” I asked slowly, and he smiled, looking at my face while shaking his head. “No,”

I bit my lips, uncertain about what to do next. The memory of yesterday warmed my cheeks, but his revelation about a woman he had slept with stirred something else within me.

“So, you slept with that woman before? Was it for pleasure or to gain information?” I hesitated, and his smile faded slightly as he lowered his gaze.

My gaze also landed on his bare chest, biceps, and muscles. He wasn’t as bulky as Ranaji, and while all the brothers were the same height, he was leaner than him.

He lightly sucked on his lips and shook his head, sucking a sharp breath. “Will it hurt you?” his voice was low.

I gulped nervously, unsure why it was already causing me pain. “Why would it hurt me? I mean, you’re getting to the Princess of Mehrangarh,” I preached, and he lifted his gaze to meet mine.

“But we’re kind of married too,” he intoned.

I shook my head. “That’s good for fun and delusion to keep us happy, perhaps, but in reality, there is no ‘us.’ You are a prince, and I am just a maid. While I may be in a stronger position than other maids, well-respected and loved, I am still a maid. I’m thinking about going back to Mahabaleshgarh because it’s clear that I’m causing problems in your life,” I attempted to express while looking at him, his gaze intensifying as he shook his head.

“You can’t go,” he proposed, and I shook my head. “It’s good for us both. Perhaps we’ll forget each other,” I wished, but he shook his head.

“Do you want to stay away from me?” he inquired, and I didn’t know how to respond. I was uncertain, too. A war raged in my head. “I don’t know,”

"Then, do not go," He requested, voice loathed like order, and I gulped nervously. "But, you are gettin—“

“I am already married, Suman. Bhaisa will never allow me to marry another woman. Can’t you understand that? My life is fu…messed up. You don’t want to be with me. I can’t be with another woman. I’ll die longing for a relationship with… love,” he said with agony.

My heart suddenly felt heavier. “But you love the Princess, right? No one will ever know what happened between us.” My voice slowed, and he shook his head.

"No, we don’t love each other. She loves someone else," he stated in a low, frustrated voice, and I couldn’t stop the tear rolling down my cheek.

“So, why are you marrying her?” I asked, unable to understand. He inhaled deeply. "You can’t understand that," he said.

Gulping, “At least try,” I pleaded softly. I didn’t know what was happening to me now.

He bit his lower lip slightly and lowered his gaze. “There’s an army waiting on the other side of Him, waiting for all the Hind. It’s enormous, and Mehrangarh is aiding that by supplying explosive powder.”

“The one you were making the other night?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yes, that one. However, that powder requires something substantial- perhaps equipment as large as a full-grown elephant. You know, it’s massive. I still don’t know how they’re going to get it across to this side. Huge mountains separate us. I learned about this before Rudra Bhaisa’s wedding, and since then I’ve been gathering information. It seems Mehrangarh might also be preparing. I mean, we didn’t have any contacts, and I wasn’t suspicious until I discovered that Songarh was selling yellow sand in large quantities to Mehrangarh. Therefore, Songarh’s connection with Mehrangarh made me feel uneasy.”

“Why don’t you tell Ranaji anything? And does Princess Aishwarya know about it? What about Prince Ranvijay?” I asked immediately.

He gulped, shaking his head. “Rudra Bhaisa had bigger problems at the time. He had just conquered Suryagarh, and our troubles were just beginning. Another issue could have broken us, so I kept it to myself until I had the full story. But when Ranvijay Bhaisa married Aishwarya Bhabhisa, I saw an opportunity to investigate further. When Ranvijay visited Songarh after their wedding on *Teej*, he learned about it. Since then, it has been confirmed,” he said, and I felt my mind racing at this revelation.

“So, does Ranaji know about Mehrangarh’s involvement?” I attempted to ask.

He nodded slowly. “But not much. He’s just suspicious. I didn’t tell him anything because a baby has just arrived in the Kingdom. The other empires in Hind aren’t ready for a war like that either. Mahabaleshgarh is still recovering from the loss of King Rajvardhan, and Pratapgarh is under Mahabaleshgarh. Suryagarh is working hard to strengthen its ties with southern Hind. It’s basically family everywhere. And that army is almost twice the size of ours.”

“What are you thinking?” I asked worriedly, and he lifted his gaze to meet mine. For a few moments, he stared at me before crashing into a smile.

“Nothing. There’s still time. I mean, maybe a year. By then, we’ll be capable,” he said, and I exhaled in relief. He nodded, but I still felt he was concealing something.

“Did you play any role in the alliance between Prince Ranvijay and Princess Aishwarya?” I asked, struggling to believe that Prince Ranvijay’s marriage to Princess Aishwarya was merely coincidental, especially since this state was abundant in that sand.

He shook his head slowly. “No, but I mentioned how good Ranvijay Bhaisa is to Aishwarya Bhabhisa’s father.”

I couldn’t believe it. “You are… I can’t believe you,” I gulped nervously, and he stared deeply into my eyes.

“Don’t worry,” his voice was low. “Everything is fine. It’s not as bad as I made it seem,”

I looked into his eyes. "But it looks bad," I hesitated to say.

"It's not," he insisted, and I noticed his gaze dropping to our still-intertwined hands.

"You trust me, right?" he asked, and I looked at him. "Why does it matter?" I tried to ask.

"I don’t know," he confessed before lying back on the bed, resting on his chest, stretching his arms, and inhaling deeply.

My stomach knitted.

"But we have to focus on the feast first. There shouldn’t be any mistakes," he reminded me lazily, closing his eyes.

I gulped silently, glancing at his hand, still holding mine as if he didn’t want to let go. Silence followed, and I shifted my gaze to his curly hair; he had a tiny mole on his ear. A slight smile crept onto my face as I brought my free hand closer to his hair.

"Your eyes look beautiful with kohl," I couldn’t help but say, and a small smile graced his lips. "Watch out. You seem to be falling for me," he teased.

I shook my head. “You should be careful before falling if you have expectations. I don’t have any,” I replied softly, gently brushing his hair away from his forehead.

"That's good," he murmured.

I hesitated and gulped before asking, “You didn’t explain how…can you… I mean… how can a dagger be used?” I struggled to find the right words.

He shifted slightly, covering his face with the end of my dupatta. “You will get traumatized,” he murmured in a deep voice.

“No!” I protested. “Why? I’m experienced. I know things,” I asked, even though I couldn’t calm the butterflies in my stomach.

He inhaled deeply and lazily scanned the bed for his dagger before turning to me with his green orbs. Holding the dagger, he said, “This is gold, and this part goes inside the core,” then pointed to the handle.

My heart raced at the sight of it. I gulped nervously, staring at the nearly one-inch-thick straight handle of the dagger. That was it!

“And doesn’t it hurt?” I asked.

He lifted his bewildered gaze to me. “What’s your experience with sex? How much have you enjoyed it?” His question caught me off guard. It felt like we had been friends for ages.

“Umm, how can I explain this to you?” I managed to say, trying to conceal the warmth rising in my cheeks.

He inhaled deeply and shifted closer, resting his head on my lap. Then he asked, “Are you comfortable?”

I felt a flutter in my stomach but nodded. “Yes,” he asked, “tell me then?”

I didn’t know how to tell him. I mean, where should I start? As I hesitated, he sucked on his lower lip while waiting for my response. But I truly felt compelled to tell him, as if he were the one who needed to know.

"Did he hurt you?" he asked in a low and comforting voice.

I blinked quietly and nodded slowly.

“Always?” he asked, gazing into my eyes, and I couldn’t help but nod once more.

His face stiffened. “That bastard had one job, and he could not even do that,” He cursed softly under his breath, and I couldn’t help but smile when I heard him. “You know I’m glad he’s dead; otherwise, I might have sliced him into the same number of pieces he slept with you,” he said, smiling at me.

“That would be ninety-two,” I said softly.

He sat up quickly and turned to face me. A few moments of silence followed. “In how many days?” His gaze intensified.

I gulped nervously, answering. “In three months,”

“Motherfucker!” he cursed, looking away from me. His hands were tightly clenched, and I opened my fingers to let him withdraw his hand, but he looked back into my eyes and pulled my hand. “Hey, I’m not leaving you.”

I chuckled, and a tear slipped down my cheek. He moved closer to me and gazed into my eyes. “Did he ever please you?” He asked, and I swallowed to moisten my dried-out throat.

“I’m not sure what you’re asking,” I said, gazing softly into his eyes. His face drew nearer, and I blinked, feeling my breath grow heavy.

“Like kissing you?” he asked, and I shuddered.

“Anywhere?” he asked slowly while I shook my head.

“Never went down on you?” he asked, and I looked at him in confusion. “Like kissing you down there?” I felt shy hearing him lowering my gaze and shaking my head.

“And have you ever had a… release?” he asked slowly, as I lifted my gaze to meet his eyes. I didn’t understand why his words stirred something in my lower belly.

I shook my head slowly as he blinked silently, lowering his gaze with furrowed brows. “You know, summoning someone’s soul after death is possible. I mean, we can summon that bastard’s soul into a bottle and bury it underground so he never rests in peace—“

“Stop!” I cut him off, shaking my head.

“I don’t want to do that or anything related to him,” I clarified, and his gaze softened as he looked at me. After a brief pause, he gently leaned in closer and kissed my forehead. “I’m here for you,” he drawled.

I froze and stuttered, replying, “I know,” before inhaling deeply and murmuring, “So?”

He narrowed his brows.

“How does that dagger work?” I hesitated, unable to set my curiosity aside, and he chuckled softly before responding.

He mumbled, “Um,” rolling his tongue over his lips, “so it goes in. Like the time you are comfortable using your hand. I mean, for thrusting,” he said, and I sucked my lip, feeling hot.

“So, you did that to… women? Is that what you meant by… killing women?” I asked slowly, encouraging a slight nod from him.

I bit my lower lip. “I mean, why would someone…” I was uncertain of what to say. “It is terrifying.”

But he shook his head, chuckling softly. “You don’t understand women,” stepping closer and gazing deeply into my eyes.

“When a woman tastes sin and craves it, she can either rise like a phoenix or become a slave to her desires.” His voice was deep as he inquired, “Are you saying that once a woman knows satisfaction, she can’t avoid it?”

He nodded. “But the woman working in a brothel experiences that, right? Why isn’t she satisfied and asked you to spend a night with her?” I asked.

He bit his lip slightly. “You’ve experienced it too. Are you satisfied?” he asked, leaving me stunned to hear him.

I shook my head.

“Sadly, the world of man is too occupied satisfying themselves to understand what a woman wants,” he sighed, and I couldn’t agree more with him. My husband never understood that the problem was with him, not me.

“I always hated what my Maasima did and how she lived her life. Growing up, I idolized her as my mother, but when I learned about her past, my feelings shifted to hatred. However, after her death, I realized she was a woman with desires that exceeded those of a man—whether physical, emotional, or financial. A man would come, show her some love, and then leave her to fend for herself. She had no choice but to move on. In the process, she lost her virtue; her image faded, and she became a slave to her needs, which ultimately ruined her.” He paused as I cushioned his hand, curious.

“Do you think I’m becoming a slave to my needs, like how I keep coming to you?” I asked in a low voice.

He shook his head. “No. You rose like a phoenix; you are stronger than you think,” he replied, and I gulped nervously as I glanced at his dagger.

"Do you still do that? I mean, recently?" I asked, blinking nervously.

He shook his head again. “That was almost three years ago when I was searching for some important information. I sent a woman from a brothel to a king to gather it, and she developed feelings for me, asking me to please her in return. But when I refused, she insisted. So I showed her another way,” he explained, lowering his gaze as he spoke slowly.

“Okay, that sounds dangerous. And, to protect them from you, I’m taking this dagger away,” I suggested in a low voice, pulling it from his hand.

He smiled and leaned in closer. “I already gave it to you,” he said, drawing near to my cheek and whispering, “As in, you own Agastya Dev Singh, half-wife.”

I closed my eyes, feeling his soft lips on my cheek for a moment, which made me smile.

“Agastya!” Suddenly, Ranaji's voice echoed in the chamber.

“Fuck!” Kunwarsa’s eyes widened in shock, and I felt like I was going to die right then.

A wave of panic surged through my nerves, and my eyes widened in shock. “Ranaji,” I muttered, but he quickly covered my mouth with his hand. I could hear his footsteps drawing closer as he scanned the room. “Hide,” he urged, and I glanced toward the edge of the bed. However, Ranaji might notice the curtain moving. I gulped, filled with fear and anxiety.

And suddenly, Kunwarsa lifted my legs and wrapped his hand around my waist, pulling me closer and making me lie on the bed. I couldn’t believe how effortlessly he lifted me like a leaf. My heart pounded in my mouth.

“Shh,” he hushed me, and I clenched my fists in fear.

“Calm down,” he said. I met his gaze and briefly gulped nervously. Then, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me down until my head rested against his chest. A wave of fear washed over me.

“Agastya, are you awake?” Ranaji asked again. I could sense he was very close. We were both dead.

“Stay quiet,” Kunwarsa muttered softly, tucking the surrounding comforter. He then turned to the side, using his body as a shield and resting his head on his elbow, hiding me behind him.

I felt my heart racing when he spoke. “Ji Bhaisa,” his voice was calm, filled with the timbres of sickness. I shifted even closer to him, my chest pressing against his back. The moment he quickly took my hand, wrapping it around his waist and covering it with the comforter, I felt a knot in my stomach.

I heard Ranaji draw the curtains open.

“It’s the afternoon. What are you doing in bed?” he asked, and I heard Kunwarsa sniffle lightly.

“Aarrghhh, Bhaisa, I slept outside last time, and arrghhhh, this cold. My nose and head hurt. Oh my God!” He sniffled again, and I heard the faint sound of Ranaji sitting on the bed.

Oh, my God! Such an actor!

“What? Why did you sleep outside?” Ranaji asked, sniffing again and sneezing forcefully. “Aaaaaaggghhhhhhhhccchhhiiiiiiiiii.” I quickly shut my eyes, unsure of what he was doing.

“Oh, it looks dreadful,” Ranaji remarked, then quickly added, “Try to avoid the baby and Nandani.”

Kunwarsa sniffled again. “Of course, Bhaisa. By the way, what happened?” he asked innocently, as if no woman were in his bed, as if he weren’t naked, and as if that woman weren’t hiding behind him under his comforter.

He was so insane.

I couldn’t resist pressing my forehead against his back. It felt warm, and my fingers could sense his tight abs beneath them.

His cologne overwhelmed me, making me forget everything again.

“Ah, nothing. Princess Rashmika has arrived with the head commander of Mehrangarh. I hope you can meet them. But right now, please take care of yourself and get well soon. Do you have a fever as well?” Ranaji asked, and Kunwarsa stiffened a bit.

I supposed Ranaji got close enough to touch him.

“It seems like a fever. You should get some rest. I’ll send for the physician,” Ranaji said.

Kunwarsa shook his head immediately, and I couldn't help but smile. "No, I just need to sleep. That's all I need," he said.

I felt Ranaji get up from there. "Okay. Get well soon; there's a lot of work pending," he said.

I felt Kunwarsa shift his hand beneath the comforter to grasp mine and turn slightly toward me. I closed my eyes immediately, feeling incredibly shy at that moment. He was completely naked, and though I couldn't see all of him, a blush rose to my cheeks.

"So, half-wife," he muttered slowly, wrapping his arms around me. I snapped my eyes open to look at him.

"I need to go," my voice came out scared.

But he smiled and leaned closer to my ear. I gulped nervously and tried to push him away. This bed, the comforter, and he all carried his scent. Everything felt overwhelming, yet for countless wrong reasons, it somehow felt incredibly safe around him.

As he approached, I looked into his widening eyes. I turned my face slightly to the side, unable to meet his gaze. It was beyond my capacity to stare into those eyes that could pierce me without touching me. Sensations coursed through my body as he slowly reached my ear.

The tip of his cold nose brushed against my cheek, prompting me to blink silently and part my lips. It felt more intense than I could endure.

I clenched my fingers around the bedsheet, unable to control the shiver that coursed through me. Then I felt his hand glide over mine, reaching for my palm.

His slow, deep voice, saying, "In my bed and under me, your hands should wrap around me; don't restrain yourself," made me dizzy. I felt him clasp my fist and pull my hand toward his neck, causing me to wrap it around him.

I opened my eyes, watching our hands touching, my fingers tracing his neck and shoulders, and I could hardly believe it.

His shoulders were broad, and he was strong—much stronger than I was. I shivered when he kissed my cheek. My eyes blinked rapidly before closing tightly, and I felt deeply shaken by the gentle touch on my skin.

I bit my lower lip and attempted to ask in a slow, broken voice, "Are you trying to seduce me, Kunwarsa?"

He kissed my cheek again and, with a deep voice, said, "Yes," causing me to roll my toes. It was a bold statement.

I experienced a surge of sensations in my lower abdomen simply from hearing his 'Yes.'

But the last thread of sanity had not broken within me as I reminded him, "Your fiancé is in the Kingdom, Kunwarsa Agastya."

He paused and lifted his face to look at me. I gazed into his eyes and hesitantly pulled my hand back from his neck.

"You really had to spoil it?" Upset, he said, "It could have been our first kiss."

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter what type of relationship you two are in; it's still cheating until you're not separated," I explained slowly, and he inhaled deeply, moving away from me.

"Okay, as you say, half a wife throwing full-time tantrums," he said slowly, pressing his face into the mattress and releasing me from him.

A slight smile crossed my face at the sight of him acting like a baby pleading for candy but getting denied.

I pushed the comforter aside and tried to get out of bed.

But I noticed him lift his gaze and look at me silently, his expression weary. "You're forgetting your dagger," he said, pushing it toward me. I gulped nervously as I took it in my hand.

"I hope it's clean," I mocked.

He smiled faintly. "He takes a bath with me every day,"

I laughed a little.

"Don't use it," he said in a deep, concerned voice, and I shook my head.

"I wasn't going to anyway," I said slowly, and for some reason, I felt comfortable with him now. It was as if I didn't want to leave.

But I had to.

I looked at his hand resting on the bed, and I couldn't help but take it and kiss his knuckles. "Thank you for trusting me, Kunwarsa," I said slowly, and he inhaled deeply.

"I want to hear you say thank you for thrusting into me, Kunwarsa," he said in a slow, teasing voice, and my eyes widened in shock before I clenched my teeth slightly.

"I'm sure you've heard plenty of it. How about a change?" I said, and he laughed. "Hahahahahaa,"

I smiled and glanced at the dagger in my hand.

I did not know, but taking this dagger with me felt wrong. He had brought me a black thread; since then, his thread has been missing, and now this dagger, too, when he was working on something dangerous.

He was used to this dagger. Not only for sinning, but also for killing, protecting, and even playing. It felt like his second hand.

I swallowed quietly and glanced at him.

"I think you should keep the dagger with you," I said slowly as he gazed at me. "Why? Are you upset?" I smiled to show that I wasn't upset and shook my head. "I don't need to take it. It's about trust. And I trust you,"

I didn't understand why I said that. Perhaps we both recognized what was between us, despite everything we were saying to one another.

After everything he said to me, I sensed he was not interested in any girl. The way he returned from the brothel and shared everything with me made me confident that he would never make a mistake.

If he would, I would understand there would be reason for that.

Moreover, his safety was at risk. I can't imagine what might happen if he ever got into trouble and couldn't find his dagger; his situation would only worsen.

"It's alright, you can keep it. It's been with me since I was born. My mother used to carry this dagger. It has witnessed my life more than anyone else has. It has seen all the phases I've lived and loved. It has observed my innocent and sinful times without any judgment. It's precious to me, like a part of my life, and I want to share that part with you. I don't know what the future holds for us, but I just want to give you a piece of my life," he said, and I lowered my gaze to his clenched fist, listening to him. I swallowed silently and pushed the dagger to his side.

"Don't give me this dagger, then. Make me your dagger—a chamber for all your secrets and innocence. You haven't shared much about your life with your brothers, who raised you like fathers, but you've given me glimpses. I feel it's a greater gesture than giving something dear to your heart," I attempted to express as he placed his hand over mine.

"It would be too dark for you to be the chamber of my heart," he drawled.

I bit my lip. "Still, I want to be more than just a half-wife, a dinner, Kaakisa, or anything you want me to be. I want to be the keeper of your secrets, as you mentioned in front of Princess Aishwarya when you said your biggest secret is that you already have a wife," I said slowly, and he nodded in agreement.

"Okay, whatever you want to know, I'll be honest," he intoned. I looked at him, held his hand, and kissed my fingers with deep emotion.

"But don't go to Mahabaleshgarh," a faint smile crossed my face as I nodded.

"I will try," I said, pulling my hand back as he loosened his grip. I parted the curtains and walked away from him.

Unknowingly, I sensed a sudden shift between us, as if a thick wall had just crumbled. Yet, I still couldn't fully grasp what he had told me; it was overwhelming to process at that moment.

"Hey, Dinner. I want lunch," he suddenly called out. I watched him part the curtains and stand up, a white cloth wrapped around his waist.

"I will send another attendee, Kunwarsa."

He looked at me and smiled. "And the deal is still the same. If you want to get killed, I can gladly invoke my right," he said, opening his arms wide, and I shook my head.

"In your dreams," I exclaimed, and he laughed. "You mean wet dreams,"

I felt a sudden blush spread across my cheeks.

"Kunwarsa," Suddenly, my gaze fell upon an attendee entering the chamber, and as soon as she spotted me, her eyes widened slightly in shock.

I immediately turned to look at him. "Kunwarsa, Nandani said it's kind of urgent. " He looked confused and nodded.

"Okay, let her know I'm on my way," he said, and I hurried past the attendee, eager to jump into the well and assess the groundwater depth.

She left the chamber, and I looked at the attendee, waiting for her to explain why she had arrived. “Kunwarsa,” she said slowly, causing me to furrow my brows. “Yes?” I asked, and she gulped, glancing at me before speaking in a low voice, “Princess Rashmika wants to meet you.” I nodded, acknowledging her words, and replied, “Alright, I need to freshen up. Please call her over for lunch.” She nodded and licked her lips slightly, and I rolled my eyes, unable to believe what was happening in my life now.

I ignored her and tried to walk toward the bathroom, but she collapsed before me. My eyes widened in shock. She cried out, looking at me, yet I continued to walk into the bathroom, ignoring her.

Seriously?

After bathing and getting ready in a fresh white kurta and a long loincloth, I went to my meeting area, waiting for lunch. After some time, I heard the announcement of Rashmika’s arrival and stood up to welcome her. I saw her enter with a few of her attendees, all dressed in pink with dupattas on their heads.

"Greetings, Prince Agastya," she said warmly, and I replied. "Welcome to Suryagarh,"

I walked forward and took a seat across from her on the couch.

“How’s everything? Was your journey comfortable?” I asked, and she smiled, nodding.

"Of course, why would not be?" She said, guiding her attendee to step forward and place a plate on the table in the middle.

“This is for you,” she said, and I furrowed my brows slightly.

“What is it?” I asked, and she let out a small giggle.

“Something that you will enjoy,” she said, and I blinked before lifting the clothes off the plate. My brows furrowed in confusion as I looked at the long, black object. It was made of iron and had a long tube of about two feet attached to a thick handle-like structure.

“What is this?” I asked, holding it in my hand. It was heavy—heavier than the sword and spear.

“It’s called a gun,” she said with a smile, and I didn’t know, but suddenly a suspicious thought crossed my mind.

"What does this do?" I asked, my voice filled with confusion.

"It kills," she replied, and I got up from the couch.

“How?” I inquired.

She turned to look behind, and I glanced at the head commander stepping forward. He took the gun from me and aimed it at a tree. I saw him pull a handle, and a blast occurred, causing him to step back a little. The next thing I saw was an apple falling from the tree.

"Oh," I said, impressed, but suddenly my mind was blown. "What is this? What caused the blast?" I tried to ask, and the head commander looked at me with a slightly fearful smile.

"It is gunpowder,"

And I tried to behave incognito. “Oh, what is that? I don’t know about it,”

I said, taking the gun from his hand and aiming at another apple, faking a wide, impressed, and happy smile.

“This is imported by Mehrangarh. We buy this powder from Songarh and use it in these guns. Our army is going to use it too. What do you think about it?” he said, and I didn’t understand why, suddenly, just a day after the brothel incident, he was telling me about gunpowder.

That only meant one thing. Either he was right or he was just covering up for something with this.

“Impressive! I love it, Rashmika. Thank you so much,” I said, smiling at her as she smiled back.

“Yes, I knew you would love it,” she said. I pulled its handle, and a strong thunder ran through my body, making me shake and fumble a little.

“Oh my goodness, it’s powerful,” I tried to say, making an effort to act normally, but inside I was freaking out. I knew that this ruthless commander was up to something and had grown suspicious of me. There was no way he would come with Rashmika. I mean, who would send a commander with the princess?

Well, Eklavya went too. However, we were three brothers, and we were capable of directing an army, while Mehrangarh clearly was not.

And suddenly, I remembered.

“Where’s Eklavya?” I asked, glancing at Rashmika as her smile slightly faded.

“He came with us too,” she said slowly, and I furrowed my brow.

“Oh, so my princess has protection from two commanders,” I tried to say as I returned to my seat. She laughed softly, then looked at her commander and said, “You can go.”

He walked away from there, and I watched as the attendees began serving us.

I spent the afternoon with her, having lunch and chatting a bit, trying hard not to give them any hints.

I didn’t know if Rashmika was stupid or just acting like it. I mean, the commander came here to teach me how to use the gun and make me believe they were using gunpowder for it, as if they were trying to propose a business deal here.

Smart.

Making money from both sides.

Suddenly, I turned to Rashmika and asked, "Did you hear there's a rumor going around that scary noises come from the other side of the mountains?"

Her brows thinned in a line as she shook her head. "No, I do not think so. I mean, the mountains are closer to us. If anything came from the other side of the mountains, we would know first," she said with a soft chuckle.

"That's true," I replied, standing up from the couch. "You should go rest now because I need to meet my Bhaisa and take care of the feast preparations."

She nodded and left, leaving me alone. I immediately returned to my bedroom and sat down on the couch.

I needed to find out what that big thing was. There was no way this gun could kill our army since they couldn't import it in large numbers without attracting attention, and they were no saints who would show me this gun before importing it.

That only meant that these guns were just a cover-up; their firepower had more uses. Suddenly, a thought came to mind.

If a three-foot gun could shoot gunpowder to kill one person, then there could be a big gun that could shoot gunpowder in enormous quantities, which could kill many people at once. Furthermore, it would not be imported because the fishermen near the sea fall under the territory of kingdoms, and if not us, then others must have known.

I felt restless and went to meet Eklavya. After talking to him, I realized he didn't know about it, but he told me that there were frequent meetings happening at the back of the Kingdom where they store war weapons.

That meant I had to go to their weapon godown once. Unwantedly, I was feeling suspicious about Rashmika too, now.

After meeting him I went to meet Ranvijay Bhaisa to look after the preparations.

I did not meet her after noon, or my mind was too stuck on that gun thing to try searching.

I couldn't sleep that night; only two days remained until the grand feast. An enormous crowd of guests had arrived for the Princess's naming ceremony. I worked all day alongside them to take care of the guests—welcoming them and talking to them; a few meetings took place, and by the end of the day, I felt exhausted and sleepy.

"Shall we bring your dinner, Kunwarsa?" the attendee asked as I entered my chamber late at night. I shook my head lazily, took off my kurta, and lay on the bed.

"No, not hungry,"

My head was pounding from lack of sleep, and I sensed that something was wrong and about to happen. I was exhausted, but the scenario kept replaying in my mind.

And I couldn't leave during the celebration.

I pressed my hand against my head to reduce the pulsating sensation, and suddenly, a sweet voice entered my ear.

"Kunwarsa, dinner,"

I inhaled deeply, closed my eyes, and reached out my hand to her. I knew who she was.

She approached me quietly, and I gazed at her as she gazed back.

"Someone will see," she said, looking at the open curtains of the entrance. I held her hand to help her sit on the bed and then stood up.

I went to draw the curtains for the bed and windows, then laid back on the bed on my chest, resting my head in her lap.

She hesitated a little at the sudden touch but gave in after a few moments. I did not know, but her embrace felt good. She was less chaotic, sorted, mature, and understanding. Needless to say, she was also caring and simple.

I had always disliked girls with big egos and unnecessary attitudes. However, she was calm and composed. She remained silent, and I wrapped one arm around her while letting my other arm fall low, reaching the floor.

The silence felt like heaven after too much noise.

"Are you okay?" she asked slowly. I shook my head and said, "My head hurts."

I could feel her thighs beneath my face. She felt warm—comfortingly warm—but I sensed that she found me cold, unable to get cozy around me.

"Should I massage your head?" she asked slowly, and I inhaled deeply. She pressed her thighs together, and I could feel it.

"If you want," I said in a slow voice. I felt her touch my head, her fingers slowly slipping into my hair and slipping.

Suddenly, my wrist brushed against her feet, and she stiffened slightly. A faint smile crossed my face as I intently took my palm closer to her feet. When my fingers contacted her toes, she rolled them, attempting to pull them away without drawing my attention.

However, it felt good to me.

I gently touched her toes, and her fingers slowed on my head. She also wasn't wearing her toe rings.

As I touched the tip of her toes, once and then again, from the bigger to the smaller one, she slowly gave in.

I could sense the tension and tightness in her body. Her breathing was noticeably uneven.

"Kunwar Agastya," She muttered in a slow voice, and I lazily hummed.

"Hmmmm,"

"Ann, your hand," she muttered slowly. I brought my hand even closer to her feet, touching their base, which made her feel ticklish.

She curled her feet and crossed them, and a soft chuckle escaped my lips.

But slowly, she gave in, and I kept feathering her feet while she massaged my head. Her feet were half an inch smaller than the size of my palm, which I discovered by cupping them. The soft tickling made her giggle a little.

“Is everything okay?” she asked again slowly, and I nodded, bringing my finger closer to her ankle. My thumb grazed the bone, and I realized she wasn’t wearing any anklets either. I wondered how she would look once she got ready.

She was beautiful. Her eyes were deep and lovely, and her smile could brighten anyone's mood.

But I feel terrible that she rarely smiled. In four years, I had hardly seen her smile, but now I could bet she was smiling.

I took a deep breath and brought my hand closer to her calf, softly brushing my fingertips against her skin.

She tightened her thighs, and I could feel her body responding to my touch.

“How was your day?” I asked slowly, and she replied, slightly breathless, “As always.”

“Like dreaming about me,” I said slowly, cupping her leg to feel its thickness.

“Umm, no, I do not,” she muttered slowly as I lowered my hand to her toes, intertwining my fingers. She immediately grabbed my bicep, and I could feel her pressing my fingers with her toes. A smile spread across my face.

My *dinner* was ready to be eaten.

His fingers made me question everything about my life and beliefs. I sat frozen, unable to move even an inch as he engrossed himself in the featherlight touches of his fingers on my feet and up to my calf. It felt surreal for countless reasons, and I could not list them.

"Umm, no, I do not," I muttered. My voice had long been lost in the depth of sensations he planted through my skin.

His breathing tickled against my thighs through the fabric. The warmth and weight of his face felt too heavy to ignore. I bit my lower lip, trying not to make it audible how much he was affecting me.

A deep shiver ran through my body when I felt the rough tips of his fingers moving slowly down from my calf to my feet, reaching my toes and pressing his fingers through the gap between them, caging them.

My hand instinctively pressed against his biceps, even as I tried not to anticipate. Ironically, my mind was already too overwhelmed and dizzy to recognize that I was, in fact, anticipating. A slow, deep exhale escaped my lips with a slight tremor, and I quickly pressed my lips together.

My brows knit together, sensing how calmly he could ignite my world. And he had just begun.

"Kunwarsa," I managed to mutter, trying to remind him that it was not right. But I could not speak another word because, for some reason, I was not able to feel what was right or wrong after coming into this chamber, into his bed, and under him.

It was enough for me to give up on everything if it meant spending some time with him, even in silence. That was what he was doing to me. He was captivating me without even trying. Or maybe he was trying after all.

A wave of sensation rolled through my body, and I stiffened, pressing my thighs together. The sensations crawled up my legs like butterflies dancing. Then, feathering it, he gently pulled his fingers back from my toes to the bridge of my foot.

I gulped silently and bit my lips, trying hard to remain quiet and convince him it didn't bother me.

But it was bothering me beyond just bothering me. It was taking me somewhere I had never been. A place that felt cold against my skin and warm to my insides. It appeared darker to me but ignited something inside me. An itch was born between my thighs, and I felt an urge to press my legs together to dispel it.

A sweet wetness erupted in me down there, and the moment he muttered in his deep, hoarse, slow voice, "You are beautiful," I felt my nipples hurting against my blouse.

I couldn't believe how crazy I felt right now. And how he was managing to do this without even trying. Was he too much for me to handle? He was.

I bit my lower lip, and suddenly he sat up, sending a shiver through me as he held my waist and pulled me closer to him.

I stared at him in shock, kneeling motionless before him. His weary green eyes showed thirst. I gazed at my palm resting on his bicep. The weight of his arm around my waist felt too heavy to resist, and he drew me closer, pulling me into him.

My knees felt weak, and I couldn't figure out how to adjust. When he lifted me slightly and made me sit on his lap, they settled on either side of him. My breathing quickened, and lines of confusion formed on my forehead. It felt as if I was suddenly on fire. Every hair on my body stood up as if to see who had pulled them out of the grave.

"Ah, Kunwar Agastya," My voice hitched, and suddenly, he pulled me even closer, making my eyes widen with shock. I felt his muscular, hard thighs under me, not letting me feel settled. My knees stuck in my skirt, unable to part more.

His gaze lowered to my legs, and I felt his hand on my calves. He crawled his hand upwards, pulling the hem of my skirt along with it to my thighs. The air brushed against my bare skin, making me feel insanely timid. The words hung in my throat, but a question appeared through my lips. "What are you doing?"

To my defeat, it came out with a plea. Slow and inviting.

And the moment he pulled me even closer, I went breathless, feeling him hard under me. I flinched slightly at the unexpected touch, but the warmth was so captivating that I couldn't help but give in Slowly.

My gaze lowered to his chest, touching mine. I was small for him. Goosebumps appeared on my neck and breast, making my nipples poke into his chest when he leaned into my neck and whispered slowly.

"I am yours, Sumanika," His words sent a shiver down my spine, melting me more into him. My full name from his mouth felt as if he knew me more than anyone else. The heat in my core collided with the heat of his hardness, soaking the fabric between us. He was hard, rock hard, tight, thick, and dangerous—all in all.

My lashes felt too heavy to blink. I let them rest, feeling his lips brush against my ear.

"You shouldn't do it," a whisper escaped my lips.

"You can pretend that I'm not doing it," he muttered in my ear, making me feel the heat of his breath traveling inside, tickling my skin and wetting my core.

My palms rested against his biceps, feeling confused about whether to hold him or not. My uneven breaths became audible as I sensed his hand slowly slipping down to my lower back.

He lifted his face and looked into my eyes. I blinked silently with timidity and arched my back straight. He slowly pulled me closer, and my body felt a different current coursing through my nerves as he made me feel his length through the soft glide.

To my surprise, it felt good.

My lips curled inward against my teeth to keep a moan from escaping.

“Does it feel good?” he asked slowly, and I nodded slightly. I closed my eyes and lowered my face, hiding the visible ooze on it.

He pulled me against him once more, and this time it felt even more overwhelming. A soft moan escaped my lips. It was impossible not to anticipate.

"I own this one.” His words made me feel even weaker, and the next glide had me submitted to him like never before. My hold tightened on his biceps, and when he did not push me again against him, my hips pushed themselves, earning the sensation from him.

His breaths became audible, and the stiffness in his body made it clear that I was keeping him on the edge of release. My mind had grown too numb to do anything except roll my hips against him.

His hand felt unnecessary. The wetness erupting in my core started to soak the fabric between us even more. The heat was noticeable. Surprisingly, an urge building into me made me hungry to get rid of it.

“Ahh,” I suddenly felt restless.

My dupatta was slipping off my shoulder, but it was the least of my concerns now. I pulled my knees even closer to him, and my head rolled back, unable to stop myself. This was too significant to ignore.

"Urghhh," His soft growl sent the confidence into me I did not know I needed. Suddenly, I felt his arm tightening around me, making it difficult to move against him. I widened my hips, and they started moving against him. It was insanely good. The thickness rubbing against me felt like something I had never felt before. The warmth was comforting, and the thrill of doing it made me do it.

"Ahhghhm," Another moan escaped my lips as my body felt hot from the exertion. My cheeks flushed feverishly. Sweat beads formed on my forehead, and my braid became disheveled, trapped beneath his arm. I pressed my fingers into the flesh of his bicep in anticipation.

"I want you to leak all our wetness on me. Make me dirty with it. Show me what no one could even think you could do to me," His words made me feel even wetter, and suddenly, our eyes met. His gaze was intense, hungry, and dry. His lips were parted, huffing, and a moan escaped my lips as I suddenly felt a strong shudder running through me body.

"Ahhhgggggghhhh,"

A slight smile appeared on his face, and I immediately closed my eyes and glided my hips back and forth against his hardness more fiercely and intensely to feel a few more shudders running through me, collapsing me like a Kingdom of sand in his lap and wetness leaking through my core like a river through a canal.

My breathing was heavy as I rested my head on his shoulder, unable to feel anything in that moment. The shudders slowly subsided, and after regaining a normal rhythm in my breaths, I lifted my face to look at him.

I couldn’t meet his gaze, but the pride in his eyes brought a hidden smile to my lips.

Suddenly, I felt his hand moving down to my thighs, slipping inside, but I immediately cupped his wrist and shook my head.

He gulped as he looked at me, pulling his hand back only to grasp my wrist and make my fingers brush against my core.

The warm, slick wetness made me feel hot in my knees, but the moment he brought my wrist close to his face and took out his tongue to lick the tip of two middle fingers, I felt crushed.

I dived into the well of timidity, and he was not finished. He took both of my fingers and licked them, looking into my eyes.

“You are incredibly sweet,” his words sent a shiver down my spine. A pointless reminder made me lower my gaze that he had a sweet tooth.

I attempted to shift off his lap, but he drew me closer, and I felt him lean in to my ear and whisper softly. “My touch is so healthy for your skin. You should make it into your skincare routine,”

I swallowed hard and gazed into his eyes. What on earth did I do?

The green color had suddenly become a symbol of evil for me—an evil that had just made me realise what he could do in a few moments without even trying harder.

My stomach twisted, and I said, “I should go.” I tried to move away, but he pulled me back closer, wrapping his arm around me and placing another on my head, drawing me into the warm hug. I hesitated a little but closed my eyes, slowly giving in.

He patted my head, and tears welled up in my eyes. This was overwhelming.

“Hey,” he murmured softly against my cheek, compelling me to look at him.

“You didn’t do anything. I did everything,” he said, but his words did not change how I felt at all.

I shook my head.

"This was wrong. You are a Prince, and I am just a maid. Nandani would hate me for this. Ranaji trusts me, and I am... in the arms of his brother. With no shame, uncensored, naked," My voice broke as a tear rolled down my cheek, and suddenly, he brought his lips closer, stopping just a centimeter from mine. I moved back an inch, struck by the revelation that had just occurred me.

"I will eat you, Suman, I will fucking eat you. This is a weak side of mine. The last time I heard your shaking voice, I ended up marrying you. Do you want me on my knees for you?" His words made me close my eyes, and I shook my head slowly.

“Then never bring this prince and maid thing up to me again. We walked past it the day I claimed you as my wife.”

“Half wife,” I reminded him as he leaned closer, kissing my nose softly. “There is no concept of a half-wife, stupid,” and a soft chuckle escaped my lips.

"What about Princess Rashmika? She is you-,"

“Keep an eye on her until I get back,” he interrupted, and I drew back to look into his eyes, confused.

“Is she involved?” I asked right away, and he nodded slightly. “Maybe,”

I hastened off his lap, feeling as if a mountain had struck me. Who could we trust these days? Yet, the thought of her being a threat to him made my stomach tighten.

“What will you do now?” I asked, looking straight into my eyes. He replied, “Taste you directly from my tongue.” I rolled my eyes immediately and stood up from the bed, unable to believe him. But he quickly took my hand and made me meet his gaze. My eyes lowered to his hand, which gripped my fingers, drawing them closer to his lips.

He licked my fingers again and bit on his lower lip, shaking his head a little.

"You are so sweet. I feel already addicted. What do you eat?" he asked slowly, and I furrowed my brows.

"How many women have you tasted?" I couldn’t help but ask, and he looked at me, raising his brows.

"One."

"You’re lying," I attempted to say.

He shook his head. "I’ve left a few things exclusively for my wife," he said, and I immediately pulled my hand back.

"You should stop calling me that," I tried to say, and he furrowed his brow with a wicked expression.

"Why so?"

I sighed deeply and looked at him. "Because...," I started, but couldn’t find the words. He waited a few moments before replying. "I think you need time to figure out the 'because.'"

I lowered my gaze and shook my head.

"Because no one knows who we are to each other," I tried to say, and 'no one' was really him in the back of my mind. He stayed silent, holding my hand gently, unable to answer as he lowered his gaze.

"It's okay, you don’t have to answer. I know it’s complicated," I tried to say, and he looked at me.

"I’m clear about it. You need to battle your mind," he said, kissing my fingers. I dragged my hand back from his hold and smiled weakly at him.

"You shouldn’t be hungry. I brought you dinner, and it’d be good if I don’t walk out empty-handed at this late hour from your chamber," I tried to say, and he stood up, smirking a little.

"Someone is getting good at sneaking out," he said, walking past me while taking my hand.

"Let's eat together," he said, sitting on the couch, and I immediately shook my head, feeling the heat in my cheeks at the sight of him half-naked and tempting before me on the couch.

"You know, I cannot do it,"

He chuckled softly while looking at me. “You’ve already done a lot more,” he said, reminding me of our heated encounter as he pulled me closer. I sat beside him, and he asked, “How was your day?”

I watched him take a bite and shove it into his mouth. “Umm, it was good, and you should wash your hands before eating,” I managed to say, and he replied, “Have you ever seen a lion wash his hands before having his meal?”

I inhaled deeply and sharpened my gaze at him. "But there should be some difference between an animal and a man."

He quickly lifted his gaze to meet mine, and I felt as though I had spoken out of turn and muttered, “Sorry.”

“Good,” he muttered, pushing the plate closer to me. “Do you want to eat?” he asked, and I looked at him in disbelief.

"From your plate?" I asked, and he nodded. "I don't think I should."

He paused for a moment before saying, “I think you should. Both my Bhaisa share their plates with their wives.”

I bit my lip, feeling a flutter in my stomach at his words. “But they are their wives,” I attempted to say, and he raised an eyebrow and asked, “Did I say anything different?”

I clenched my hand on my skirt, attempting to say, "I already had dinner."

He chuckled and insisted again, "The fuel is burnt; you need more."

A smile appeared on my face as I looked at my hand. "I should clean... it," I said. He shook his head. "I already licked it clean. But yes, unless you want to get rid of my sal..." I sucked on the tip of my own finger before he could finish, and a wide smile appeared on his face with a slight blush.

“Okay, you don’t want to,” he said, and I reached out my hand to take a bite, reminding him, “Just a bite.”

He nodded and kept eating as I took a bite.

“You know, an attendee tried to seduce me,” he suddenly said, and I looked at him with furrowed brows.

"What??" I asked in shock.

"Yes," he chuckled, chewing his food.

"Who?" I asked, already feeling hatred toward her.

"The one who saw us together," he added.

"In the afternoon yesterday?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"How?" I asked, looking at him.

"She suddenly fell in front of me, thinking I would help her up," he said, and I furrowed my brows, unable to believe such things were happening in the Kingdom.

"Should I talk to her?" I asked slowly. After all, I had the authority to scold them.

He shook his head.

"So, you liked it?" I asked, confused. Right after we had a heated encounter on his bed, he told me that someone was trying to hook up with him, and he seemed okay with that.

"No, I didn't say that," he replied slowly, looking at me.

"But it seems like it," I tried to say.

"Wait a moment," he suddenly turned to look at me.

"Are you jealous, half-wife?"

I shifted back a little, taken aback by his words, and tried to shake my head. "Why would I be?" I asked in my defense.

"Well, it's pretty evident on your face," his words made me cup my cheeks, and I shook my head.

"No."

Then he moved closer to me. "Yes."

I shook my head, leaning back against the armrest of the couch. "No."

He hovered over me, and I quickly placed my hand on his chest. "Yes," I tried to say.

"Agastya," but suddenly a deep voice caught my attention. I turned to see the head commander of our army parting the curtains and looking at us.

His face turned bright red, and he fumbled.

"Oh... umm, sorry, I should... uh, come back."

I turned to see his annoyed expression.

"You already spoiled it, Eklavya," he said.

He sat back, and I immediately stood up, placing the dupatta on my head. I watched him walk in and bow slightly with a smile. "Pranam, Sum... umm, I mean, Bhabhisa," his words made my cheeks flush, and I quickly walked past him, rushing back to my chamber. My heart raced that night. Everything that happened clouded my mind the whole evening. The image of him, the memory of me sitting in his lap, swaying my hips against him, feeling his intense warmth—it was overwhelming. I couldn't sleep properly because I felt hot all night.

I woke up in the morning and returned to my work, trying to act as if nothing had happened the night before. "How are you?" Nandani asked as I walked to her chamber. She was now walking, holding the baby in her arms.

"I should be the one asking you that," I said, motioning for the attendees to start cleaning her chamber as I approached her. "How is the little princess doing now?"

I looked at her sleeping peacefully in her mother's arms, and I couldn't help but smile widely at her.

"She's having a hard time adjusting to her father's rough hands, which feel like bricks to her compared to her mother's," Nandani said, and I suddenly chuckled.

"Who has brick hands?" I heard Ranaji abruptly enter the chamber, walking closer to her. I instinctively took a step back.

"She said you do," Nandani replied, slowly handing the baby to him. I watched the smile on Ranaji's face as he cradled her in his arms. I would bet that everything paled in comparison to this feeling for him.

"Suman, I really need to take a bath," she said, catching my attention, and I nodded. "Okay, I'll get your water prepared."

She nodded and suddenly pulled me aside. "Come here." My eyes widened in slight shock as I looked at her with confusion.

"Did you see Rashmika?" she asked, and I shook my head slightly.

"Why?" I asked.

She sighed deeply. "I don't know, but I have a bad feeling about her. You weren't here when Aishwarya and I met her. She seemed so disoriented around us. I mean, what kind of princess doesn't want to know about her husband's family and kingdom?"

She said, and I furrowed my brows.

"What? Really?" I tried to pretend, but it was an excellent opportunity to tease her about Rashmika potentially not being a good person.

"Yes, I don't know, maybe it was her first time. And what kind of princess visits her in-laws before the wedding? It's not our tradition," she said, and I shook my head.

"I don't know what to make of it," I replied. "But I can keep an eye on her if you want."

She nodded immediately. "That would be perfect. You know, I could even tell Aishwarya about this," she said, to which I asked slowly, "But why?"

"I don't know, she doesn't seem very perceptive when it comes to reading faces," Nandani said, looking at me.

"And you think I am?" I asked back.

She nodded. "You understand me and my mind," she said, and I chuckled.

"I get you. I'll keep an eye on her," I confirmed, now sure that Rashmika was up to something. Because while Kunwarsa Agastya could be mistaken, Nandani was clever. She could bring Rana Rudra Dev Singh to his knees; she didn't need an introduction.

"Okay," she said.

I walked past her to set up her bathing arrangements. After that, I went to see Daadisa to handle her meals. She reminded me about the marriage details, and I couldn't help but smile faintly.

I returned to the kitchen and saw Kunwarsa Agastya walking with a beautiful woman. It must be Princess Rashmika. I watched them talking about something, and I didn't know why, but I felt a surge of fire in my heart as I observed them.

Suddenly, his gaze shifted to mine, and I froze, staring back at him. My breath hitched, and just before Princess Rashmika could follow his gaze, I turned and walked away.

I couldn't mess this up. I had to find out what her poison was.

The day concluded, and I returned to my room. I woke up early because, at last, it was the big day—the princess's naming ceremony.

It was early morning, and I dressed in a simple pale red outfit. As the widow of my late husband, I couldn't wear deep, vibrant colors, but this newborn princess meant so much more to me than his lifeless form. Besides, I also had a new husband now.

After drying my hair, I braided it and walked out of the room to see the preparations in progress. The entire kingdom resembled a Diwali festival, adorned with flowers and multicolored curtains, evoking the spirit of Holi.

I went to Nandani's chamber and found her already awake. The event would start later in the morning, and chaos was unfolding in the kingdom because, after the naming ceremony, the doors would open for the villagers for the feast and donations.

I watched Nandani prepare for the Princess's naming ceremony. She let out a deep sigh of frustration and glanced at me. I couldn't help but smile. She had gained weight during her pregnancy and was struggling to tie the waistband.

"Let me help," I said, and she nodded as she got to her feet.

"Inhale," I said, and she pulled her stomach in. I tightened the knot, and she exhaled deeply.

"I hope it won't hurt you," I managed to say, and she shook her head.

"I'll come out of it as soon as the ceremony ends. Plus, I need to lose weight. It's not looking good on me," she said with a pouted face, and I shook my head.

"You look beautiful as always, even cuter," she said, a wide smile appearing on my face.

"I'll ask Rudra to help me lose weight," I furrowed my brows in confusion. "How can he help?"

And she gave me sidelong glances, saying, "With sex." Her bold words instantly reminded me of Kunwar Agastya, and I couldn't help but lower my gaze. Part of me wanted to tell her everything, but that would mean creating problems for his wedding, if it was going to happen. Besides, it wasn't my place to be a hurdle in that. If it meant anything to him, he should make everyone aware of it.

But I didn't know why seeing him with Princess Rashmika made me feel bad, especially after what happened the other night. The image of his face sucking on my fingers was still vivid in my mind. His eyes appeared devilishly attractive, and his soft curls looked cute.

"Why are you smiling?" Nandani pulled me out of my thoughts, and I quickly shook my head.

"Umm, it's the princess's naming ceremony," I tried to say, and she suddenly smiled.

"Yes, Suman, I can't believe how far we've come, but…" She paused, and I noticed her expression change as she grew upset. Her cheeks flushed red, and I held her hands.

"But I wish Baapusa were here with us. I hope he can see his grandchild. I wanted him to be my first child." Tears rolled down her cheeks, and I shook my head.

"He's still watching you, Nandani. But from a better place," I said, as she sank down onto the couch, letting her tears flow freely and sobbing softly.

"But still, even though I'm happy that I have everything, it feels like there's a void. You know he would have cried seeing the baby. He loved children and had always been supportive and positive. I can't believe he deserved to be taken away too soon." I kneeled before her, gulping silently as I looked at her. She sobbed, and I tried to wipe away her tears.

"He was in pain, Nandani. Even if he were here, given his condition, he would not have felt happy. It would be too selfish to think only about your pain. And trust me, he may not be able to talk to you, but right now, seeing you cry for him, he must also be crying for his beautiful and powerful daughter. I don't think he would want to see you crying at the auspicious naming ceremony of your daughter. He would want you to remember him with happiness. That's what he asked everyone to do when he left: to remember him happily, so his soul feels content seeing his family smile," she said, wiping her tears as she listened to me. "Let's bring back the smile,"

She chuckled softly and smiled slightly. "Even so, I miss him so much," she sobbed, and I pulled her into a tight hug.

“That’s okay,” she calmed down after a while, and I saw Ranaji walking in with his daughter in his arms. When he saw Nandani’s tear-streaked face, he asked. "Can you hold her for a moment, Suman?,”

I nodded and took the princess from his hand.

“Can you all wait outside?” he asked, kneeling in front of her. I then led the princess out of the room to the meeting area, where Kunwar Agastya was speaking with Daadisa.

“So, what do you think of her? Is there any progress in love?” Daadisa teased him, and he chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’m a pretty inexperienced Daadisa, but you seem like a player. Tell me how you got *Daadasa* to fall in love with you,” he asked with a teasing tone, and Daadisa cupped his face with a slight laugh.

“Your *Daadasa* was like an angry king. We were both very young when we got married. Then, as I grew older, he came to take me with him. He wouldn’t speak sweetly to me; he was very work-oriented, giving orders and stating what needed to be done. Meanwhile, I was clumsy and talkative. When he returned to the chamber, I would excitedly tell him about my day, but he often fell asleep, irritated by my chatter. This continued until he got used to my talking, and we gradually learned each other’s ways. We never spoke about love like Rudra and Nandani, who keep their lips glued together as a joke. It was a simple, straightforward, responsible marriage,” she said, and I looked at Kunwar Agastya, who was listening to her intently.

“I like that simple, plain marriage too. It’s beautiful to learn about someone from the beginning and get to know them then,” he said slowly, and I rolled my eyes. Whatever he did was neither simple nor plain. How could he do that? I mean, I never understood which Agastya was the real Agastya.

Suddenly, the princess cried softly, and they both turned to look at me. I quickly started to move her a bit, and Daadisa called out to me.

"Suman, come here, sit with me,"

I gulped quietly and glanced at him as he sucked on his lower lip with a slight smile, then walked silently toward her.

“Ji, Daadisa,” I tried to say as she softly tugged my hand to get me to sit beside her.

I nervously sat down on the couch with her, and suddenly, Kunwar Agastya got up.

"Awwww, my baby,"

He walked over and sat down next to me. I felt a slight uneasiness sitting between them with a baby, and then she began. “The man has come with Abhinandan. He is a good soldier in the army. He used to serve as my guard too. You should meet him after the ceremony,”

I gulped nervously, hearing the fake laughter of Kunwar Agastya as his fingers grazed the baby’s hands.

“Hahaha, awwww, my baby. You are so small. Do you want to meet your *Kaakisa*? Do you know who she is? Do you want to go into her arms?” His words made me feel uneasy, and I could feel my cheeks burning with heat. I gulped as I looked at him, but he didn’t look at me, and Daadisa brought my attention back to her.

“He is a good man, Suman. How long are you planning to stay alone? You’re young, independent, and what’s your age? It’s too soon to give up on life. You will meet him, right? He’ll make you happy,”

I sucked on my lower lip and tried to nod. "Ji, Ji, Daadisa,"

“Are you listening, baby? What are those two talking about? Daadisa is discussing her wedding? Do you want to attend her wedding? There will be a feast,” he muttered in a childish tone, making me feel incredibly uncomfortable. I turned to look at him, and he looked back at me. I subtly shook my head without making it obvious to Daadisa.

"Alright, come to see me in my chamber after the ceremony," Daadisa said, and I nodded weakly, looking at her.

I tried to stand up a little, but he immediately stopped me.

“I’m still playing with my baby,” he pouted in front of me, while I sat silently.

“Alright, I’ll go see Abhi,” Daadisa said as she stood up from her seat. I noticed him gently tickling the baby’s feet. She smiled in her sleep, and I glanced around at the attendees watching us. One of them was the same person who had caught us the other day. I felt terribly stuck.

“Is Bhabhisa ready?” Suddenly, I heard Princess Aishwarya’s voice and immediately stood up from the couch. She smiled as she walked towards me and looked at the baby.

“She’s with Ranaji,” I said as she took the princess from my hand.

“Oh my baby, how do you feel about this ceremony?” she playfully asked the baby as I turned my gaze to Prince Agastya, who was looking at me with a blank expression. I couldn’t be sure, but his eyes hinted he was upset with me. He rolled his eyes, stood up, and walked away.

I gulped nervously, unsure of what to do. I couldn’t refuse Daadisa without a good reason, and bringing up what happened between us definitely wasn’t a good reason for now.

I excused myself to take care of the preparations. I wasn’t required to be part of the family gathering. In other words, my presence wasn’t necessary.

As I walked into the area where the food was being prepared for the feast, I began to ask how much was left to do. I spent some time motivating them and encouraging them to be at their best.

After that, I came to the main compound where the function was taking place. I looked at everyone seated in their places.

Ranaji and Nandani were sitting in front of the *Hawan Kund* across from the priests with their baby. The atmosphere was spiritual and energetic. The chanting echoed loudly around me, and I sat behind Reva, who was with other attendees.

Suddenly, Nandani turned to me and motioned for me to come over. I tried to avoid attracting anyone's attention as I approached her. She took my hand and led me to sit behind her.

I wasn't aware, but in some ways it felt good and in others it felt bad that I was hiding something significant from her.

Princess Aishwarya and Prince Ranvijay sat behind Ranaji. I shifted my gaze to locate Kunwar Agastya, but he was nowhere to be found.

And suddenly, my gaze landed on him as he walked toward us with Princess Rashmika. He chuckled a bit in response to something she said, and his eyes met mine. I quickly scanned the room to locate him in his seat. There was only one.

Nandani was busy with the chanting and Aahutis, so I shifted back and cleared the place for them. They both walked closer and took their places behind Nandani. I sat behind them with *Daadisa*, *Ranima*, Queen *Trisha*, King *Abhinandan*, and their two-year-old twin boy, who were actively trying to chew each other's fingers.

She looked happy with her grandsons. Although it was hard for her to be separated from King *Rajvardhan*, they brought light to their lives. It felt as if they lost one and gained two. Still, no one could take his place in their hearts.

I watched Princess *Rashmika* smile at *Kunwar Agastya*, and my heart ached at the sight of her touching his arm as he smiled back.

I didn't understand how these two had nothing for each other. They seemed happy together and didn't appear to hate one another. Honestly, Princess *Rashmika* looked like such a sweet girl; she was beautiful and bubbly.

I couldn't hear what they were discussing, and suddenly the priest stopped chanting and said, "Now, you can choose a name for the baby. According to the movements of the stars and the time of birth, it is advisable to keep her name starting with 'R.'"

A smile appeared on my face, and I looked at *Nandani*, turning to *Kunwar Agastya* with a smile.

"Kya naam socha hai aapne, Devarsa," "What do you have in mind?" His lips widened with a smile, and he suggested.

"Daughter of *Rudra*, *Rudraja*, the Goddess, fearless, Queen of Queens, and pride of *Suryagarh*," he said, and I could sense how much he loved her already; he became slightly emotional.

"Beautiful name," she said, and I looked at *Ranaji*, who asked, "Don't you want your name in her name? I mean, why just mine?"

"It's a beautiful name, *Bhaisa*," Prince *Ranvijay* said, and *Nandani* smiled.

"Exactly, it's a beautiful name, and she already has my name," she said, as Ranaji furrowed his brows. *Ranima* added, "*Raj* from *RajNandani*. Moreover, the lineage she carries in her blood is so powerful that she doesn't need any introduction."

Nandani nodded, listening to her, and Ranaji nodded, too.

"Alright then, *Rudraja*—Princess *Rudraja*—what about *Rudrani*?" he asked, as the priest shook his head. "Rudrani can be a name for Rudra's spouse. Since your name is Rudra, only Princess Nandani can be called Rudrani, not your daughter."

He nodded, and Kunwar Asgatya smiled. "I did my research,"

I could not help but smile. Princess *Rudraja* was already a blessed and loved child of northern Hind. But, no one dared to call her by her name because no one except Nandani could call Ranaji by his name, and since his name is in her name, no one called her by her name either.

The naming ceremony came to a beautiful end with the distribution of *prasad* to everyone. Everyone was happy and showered the Princess with countless gifts.

Princess Ranvijay and Princess Aishwarya went to oversee the donations for the villagers while I returned to Nandani's chamber; however, Daadisa stopped me.

"Suman," Daadisa's voice pulled me in, making me stop in my tracks. Her smile filled me with a sense of dread, and I swallowed nervously.

"Daadisa," I forced a smile.

"Come with me," she said, holding my hand and pulling me along. I looked around for someone who could save me from her. But my unfortunate fate felt overwhelming, as everyone else was too busy with their own work.

She led me to her chamber, and I watched as she lingered with her wooden cane. Then she smiled at me and said, "These attendants will help you take a bath and get dressed. You look tired."

I looked at a group of attendees and tried to shake my head slowly.

"But Daadisa, I think I look fine. I mean, why change my clothes and take a bath?" I tried to maintain a broad smile on my face to appear happy.

"Why not? Your marriage is my responsibility, and I will fulfill it with the utmost care. I want you to look beautiful, like someone never before seen," she said, and I lowered my gaze. If I did that, Kunwar Agastya would get angry since he clearly asked me not to go to Mahabaleshgarh, and if I didn't do it, Daadisa would be hurt. She would think I didn't trust her. I didn't want to break her heart, but it felt dangerous. I couldn't hurt either of them, especially Daadisa.

"Okay," I said, managing a smile.

I watched attendees approach, and I couldn't resist going into her chamber. My heart raced as soon as I entered the

bathroom. The scent of bathing oils filled my nostrils, making me feel weak in my knees.

"You should change into this," a fellow attendee's voice caught my attention as I looked at her, holding a bathing dress in her hands. I gulped silently, taking it from her hands and nodding as I walked behind the changing area. Thoughts of him clouded my mind against my will. The way he rolled his eyes before the ceremony made it clear how annoyed he already was. And if he ever finds out about this, he might get mad.

However, he was never my husband. He remained Princess Rashmika's fiancé, and there was no reason to go against Daadisa.

I sighed deeply with frustration, removed my dupatta, blouse, and skirt, and wrapped the bathing cloth around my bosom, which reached my thighs.

Honestly, I had never taken a bath like royalty. But Daadisa was a sweetheart; she liked to see women happy.

I stepped outside and noticed an attendee approaching me, touching my braid. She unbraided my hair, letting it fall loose down to my hips. The loose curls danced against the side of my face, making me feel unexpectedly shy.

I just wanted it to be wrapped up quickly so he wouldn't even discover it. His teasing made it clear he would get mad.

I walked toward the pool with the attendees and stepped inside. They asked me to sit comfortably, but I felt uncomfortable.

Guests filled the Kingdom. A lot of work was pending, a feast was underway, the villagers were lined up to receive donations, and here I was, experiencing the princess's treatment to marry again.

I exhaled deeply. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. Should I just tell Daadisa that I couldn't get married?

However, she would ask me why.

I didn't really know why. I mean, from her point of view, she was doing the right thing by settling down a woman with a good man so they could spend time together, start a family, and be happy. But what she didn't know was how eventful this woman's life was.

I couldn't believe that I was technically married to Prince Agatya, and no one except Commander Eklavya knew about it. Now, he was marrying Princess Rashmika, and I was seeing another man.

I sighed in frustration when an attendee caught my attention.

"Are you okay?"

I gulped and nodded silently, closing my eyes to feel whatever was happening to me. They began applying the cold paste that sent a shiver down my body. When I opened my eyes, I saw them rubbing the half-dry paste against my skin. They were cleaning the hair off my hands.

I felt the pain intensifying throughout the process and groaned a little. I had been doing this to Nandani, but experiencing it myself was incredibly different and more painful.

My skin turned red from it, and I tried to ask, "Is this necessary?"

One of them nodded and replied, "Yes, Daadisa asked us to take our time and help you get ready like a bride."

I gritted my teeth a little. I could not believe it.

After they finished with my hand, they asked me to sit on the edge of the pool so they could do the same to my legs.

It felt even more painful on it.

And then came the most embarrassing and surprising event.

"Open your legs wider," one of them said, and my eyes widened in shock.

"What? Why?"

"To clean you. It looks like a forest," one of them said, and a wave of laughter ran through us.

I couldn't believe how Nandani was okay with letting them do that every two or three months. She didn't like body hair much; she always felt uncomfortable with it.

I sucked on my lower lip and tried to ask. "Is it necessary?"

"You haven't done it before?" one of them asked. I shook my head, and she continued, "You're beginning a new phase of your life. Some experiences only happen a few times. You should make them special."

Her words didn't make me feel good, but I nodded my head in confusion.

I parted my legs more expansive, and one used a neem stick to apply some paste on my skin. It burnt a little and then she waited for it to get dry. When it got thick and dry, she looked at me and said. "Look at there,"

I gulped with fear and turned my gaze away. I knew what was about to happen. She pulled the dried-up paste with a single and quick move, and my body went on fire with the unbearable burning pain. I immediately pressed my thighs together and groaned louder.

"Urgghhhhh,"

They giggled, and I couldn't help but smile too. Why on earth was I even doing that?

After they finished, they began washing their hair. The warm water was turning cold, and I suddenly sneezed.

"We should hurry, or she will catch a cold," another said, and they began working faster. They washed my hair with soapnut powder and applied oil to nourish it before rinsing it again.

They finally applied gram and sandalwood paste to my skin to soothe the burns and redness, and it felt better.

Honestly, I felt incredibly better after taking a bath. I had never experienced this before. Now, I understood why Nandani was eager to take one—it was so relaxing.

I wrapped a clean, dry white cloth around my body and another around my hair to absorb the moisture.

"You should sit in the sunlight for a while," one of them said, leading me to the dressing area where sunlight peeked through the window. I sat on the couch and felt the rays soothing my skin. It was amazing, but I began to feel sleepy.

After a while, my body and hair dried, and then I saw an attendee step forward with an outfit in her hand. I took the velvet cloth off the plate and looked at the beautiful orange attire adorned with small beads of deep pink.

"It's beautiful," I murmured softly.

"Daadisa asked you to change into it," she said, and I nodded, taking the dress in my hand.

"You should change; we are waiting outside," they said. They left, closing the door, and I placed the outfit on the table. It felt even more beautiful than both of my weddings.

It was simply elegant, not overly royal or heavy. I tied my hair in a loose bun and looked at myself in the mirror. Inhaling deeply, I noticed a fresh glow on my skin that I had never seen before. I looked beautiful. I didn't know what it was, but it looked lovely.

I sucked on my lower lip and opened the skirt to step into it, pulling it up to wrap around my waist, pulling the cloth above simultaneously, and pulling the strings to tighten it. It felt softer than my regular outfits.

I turned around to admire a beautiful flare and a smile spread across my face.

I brought my hand closer to grasp the blouse. Removing the cloth from my bosom, I looked at myself in the mirror. My breasts were large, not excessively so, but larger than medium size—definitely noticeable given my body shape and size. I gulped, ignoring them, as they always made me feel self-conscious about my appearance, and not positively. They were not firm like those of a younger woman but more like those of an adult with children, yet I had no children.

A shady thought suddenly came to my mind, prompting me to look at myself in the mirror again. The tattoo of an eagle on my chest, which had been inked on my skin when I was a year old, looked tempting. My tribe had this tradition of inking skin to keep track of our population. To keep it hidden, they would engrave it on the chests of both genders. It was small, only about an inch big, but beautiful. I wondered if he would like it or not. And what about my bosom?

I gulped, cupping one of my breasts with my hands, and it felt big to my small hands. I remembered his size and wondered if he could cup them.

Urghhhhhh.

I quickly shook my head and shut my eyes to return from that dark place.

My lip needed punishment from my teeth, as it lay between them, and a gentle bite brought me back to reality.

I brought the blouse close to my chest and adjusted it over my breasts before pulling the sleeves up to my shoulder. I looked at the metre-long strings hanging to its back and sighed with slight frustration.

Daadisa wants to live her adulthood through me, again. Urghh.

I tried to tie the strings, but suddenly I felt a clearing of throats, and my eyes widened in shock. A wave of fright ran deep through my body, and my throat dried as I followed the voice, realizing a pair of eyes looking at me, from a couch in the corner, shrouded in the darkness.

A smirk played on his face as he leaned forward, allowing the sun to cast its rays over his deep green eyes. A not-so-old memory invaded my mind. My stomach twisted, and I felt a strange weakness in my knees as he stood up from the couch and walked toward me with his predatory steps.

I gulped nervously, trying to speak. "Wh…what are you doing here? How long have you been… there?"

He picked up a bunch of black grapes from the fruit basket on the table and plucked a few into his mouth. I looked at his well-carved, tight jaw moving against the soft fruit. I tightened my fingers on the back of my blouse to keep both ends secure.

"Before you came inside," he said slowly, and I felt an unfamiliar tightness in my lower abdomen.

"So, you have… been watching me… change?" I tried to ask, but my voice came out shaky and slow. He leaned back against the dressing table, pressing his hips against its edge, and I lowered my gaze to focus on his sweaty neck and the rolled-up sleeves of his plain, dark blue kurta. His veins were more visible on his arms than ever before.

"Not just changing but…," he lowered his gaze to my chest, and I felt my buds tightening, blossoming under his attention. "… you, caressing your bosom,"

I gulped, feeling timid suddenly, and looked at him as he popped two more grapes into his mouth, pulling them straight from the bunch. My gaze flickered between his eyes and lips, and suddenly, I felt his hand cupping my cheek, with his fingers and thumb on either side, pulling me closer. My waist pressed against his middle, and my eyes widened in shock at him.

But my lashes lowered as he brought his lips closer and pushed the grapes into my mouth. Water trailed from the corner of my mouth, down to my jaw, and he muttered, "Your throat seems dry."

And then I pulled back. I stood frozen, looking at him. The words hung in my throat as I lowered my gaze, and heat rose to my cheeks from the pit of my stomach. My eyes fell on his hand, which held his dagger. It didn't make me feel any better.

I couldn't help but chew and swallow the fruit. His lips brushed against me for a moment, but I couldn't even register it

properly. It was too quick.

"So, you wondered if this would fit in my hands?" he muttered in his slow, deep voice. He pulled me closer to him, hooking his twin finger in the lower hem of my blouse. My eyes met his, and I could feel how mad he was.

I tried to shake my head slowly.

His fingers felt rough, hard, and cold against my skin. He was holding the dagger with this hand of his, too. The chill of the metal made me feel winter, even under the sun's rays. I gulped nervously, unable to meet his intense, penetrating gaze. I tried to tighten my fist on the back of my blouse and attempted to say something.

"How did... you come inside?" My voice grew lazy and intimidated by his presence, not to mention his deep green eyes, gritted teeth, and the strength of his two fingers, which kept me pulled closer to him.

"Wrong thing to say," he said, and I felt him set the bunch of grapes on the table while bringing his other hand closer to my neck. My lashes felt heavy with the comfort of his hand on my cheek and neck and his thumb on the side of my lips, brushing gently and pulling my face closer. The faded mark of the sword cut on his thumb reminded me of the moment he filled my hair partition with his thick, warm blood.

I tilted my neck slightly backward to meet his gaze as he muttered against my lips, "Try again."

My throat felt dry and I was out of words. My brain was so busy registering all the sensations this closeness was sending into my body that it forgot to create something sensible. "What ar... are you doing here?" I managed to ask slowly, and he pulled me closer, making me shift on my feet. My fists behind my back hurt to keep the blouse's ends together as his knuckle between us pulled the front end of it.

He blinked, chewing the inside of his lower lip before muttering, "Wrong question. Try again."

I felt even weaker in my knees. My body ached from being so close to him, precisely. It was too much to handle. People waited outside for me, and I had no idea what was going on in his head.

I lowered my gaze to steady my racing heart and attempted to ask, "What do you want?"

He angrily pulled my face closer, forcing me to lift my gaze as my eyes widened in shock. My heart raced wildly, and I bit my lips, unsure of what to do.

I needed to ask a sensible question, but I didn't know how to do it since I had never seen him angry. I gulped nervously and blinked silently while looking into his eyes, then asked slowly, "Are you angry?"

His face stiffened slightly, and he nodded, briefly lowering his gaze.

"Why?" I asked.

He lifted his furious gaze and looked into my eyes while speaking slowly. "My wife is considering marrying someone else without my knowledge," His words didn't make me feel any better. I was already feeling bad, and now it felt like sparkling salt on my open wounds.

"Yes, because Daadisa does not know that I am your wife." I tried to intone, and he spun me against the table and hovered over me. I felt his legs beside mine, caging me between them. My fists felt numb, and he lowered his hand from my blouse's hem to keep the dagger on the table with a soft clanking sound.

"But you know it, right?" he asked, placing his palm on the small of my back. I felt tightness in my core. Inhaling an invisible sharp breath, I flickered my gaze, warmed by the touch of his hand on my skin. It reminded me of my first release. My mind recreated that shudder in my core as my thighs pressed together, trying not to make it noticeable to him.

"It doesn't matter," I managed to say, as he drew his lips closer to mine, causing me to lean back slightly in anticipation.

"Well, in that case, your cheeks should be hardly flushed, your eyes should be filled with hunger, and your lips should be deep red to make quite an impression on your new husband," his slow, deep voice words hurt me a little, but the proposal behind them was pretty evident, making me gulp silently.

"I'm just doing this to avoid hurting Daadisa," I tried to say in my slow voice as he leaned in closer to my neck. I closed my eyes, feeling his cheek against mine. Their warmth felt hotter than the sunlight falling on us.

"You shouldn't be here, Kunwar Agastya," I managed to say, bringing my hands up to push him away from me. However, the slow, gentle movement of his palm against my back, moving upward, along my spine until it reached my nape, made me feel like giving in so easily.

I didn't know what power his touch held that it could melt me at any time of day, in any condition. Maybe I had craved such a touch my whole life, which made me aware of its significance.

"I know exactly where I should be," he whispered softly in my ear, and I couldn't help but inhale deeply, burying my face in the base of his neck. His cologne, a blend of sweat, sunlight, sandalwood, lilies, and spice, enveloped me and made me feel alive. I still remember the sensation of his hardness against me, and at the moment his lips pressed against my neck, I anticipated where it would lead.

The memory of sensations rose to my brain, blurring the existence of everyone except him for me. His lips felt soft. I felt him inhaling against my skin, and suddenly, a gentle pain sparkled from my skin, making me hiss slowly. His fingers moved roughly into my messy bun, leaving my half-dried hair open in defeat.

My buds ached with intensity, and my back was straight as I anticipated his movements. A shiver ran down my spine when

he muttered slowly in my ear.

“I want to feel you,” his voice was lazy yet attractive. I opened my eyes, blinking in confusion. But his sinful gaze was quite clear. People were waiting outside for me, but the gentle cage of his hands felt so pleasant that I pushed that thought aside.

His gaze dropped to my lips, leaving my stomach feeling emptier. The memory of his brief touch lingered, curling my lips in and hiding between my teeth.

He inhaled deeply, lifted his gaze, and drew his lips closer to mine. My breaths caught, nearly stopping; my fist clenched on his chest, lashes pressed tight, and he whispered in a slow, painful tone, “I bet you want that too.”

I pressed my thighs together, and the moment I felt his hand lowering down to the side of my midriff from my nape, I opened my eyes to look into his. He was shielding me from the world, protecting me, and simultaneously pushing me to my limits. His rough hand slipped beneath my untied blouse, which hung from my shoulders and barely rested against my skin. His thumb was closer to my bosom.

I inhaled deeply, my lips parted, and I couldn’t help but break eye contact to make it feel less timid for me. But, the moment he encircled the outline of my bosom and gently cupped it with his hand, I felt shaken and shattered. My eyes closed tightly, and I could hear my heartbeats. My breaths were evident to both of us, and my knees grew weak, unable to support me still.

“You are so soft,” he murmured against my cheek in his deep, resonant voice, sending fresh shivers of sensation across my skin.

I buried my face in his neck as he softly pressed against my chest. A soft groan escaped from his lips, followed by a tender kiss on my cheek.

His thumb brushed against my swollen, firm bud, gently rubbing it with the pad of his thumb, drawing a slow moan from me. I had never experienced anything like this. I couldn’t believe what he was making me feel at that very moment. I had completely surrendered myself to him.

But this was just the beginning; he pressed my breast harder this time, and I couldn’t help but moan in slight pain. "Aannnhhh,"

He kissed my cheeks again, more forcefully this time. I could feel the warmth of his mouth on my skin. I noticed his other hand moving slightly, accompanied by the sound of the dagger. "Either my tongue or this," his slow voice brought a thunder of dizziness to my brain. The thought of either of them alone seems too destructive.

“Hn?” I managed to ask, and his words tingled in my ears.

“I need to taste my custom-made sweetness again,” my cheeks flushed, but the options were oddly thrilling. “Choose faster, or you’ll have both,” his following words made me feel wetter due to his impatience.

“Both?” I tried to ask. My brain struggled to process this complexity. It was busy registering the intensity of heat between us.

"This dagger inside you and my lips caressing your crown," His slow, deep voice laced with dirty words made me feel even wetter between my thighs. I tried to push them together. His hand gently caressed my bosom. The thought of his words was too unimaginable.

I gulped, moistening my throat, and managed to mutter in a slow voice, “Not your tongue.”

That would be too much for me.

“Great choice,” he muttered, and I turned to him, facing the mirror. My eyes met my own in it. I felt extremely timid. My nipples were visible through the fabric. The sleeve slipped off my shoulder, and I placed my hands on the table to steady myself.

He moved my hair away from my back, pulling it to one side. I looked at his dry, deep red lips spitting onto the tip of the dagger’s handle. My cheeks burned as I gazed at him.

He lowered his dagger, and I felt him wrap his other arm around me. His chest made me feel safe, but his hand tugging at my skirt caused me to lower my gaze. I sensed him lean into my ear, softly muttering against it.

“You need to trust me on this, Suman. I will never hurt you,” His words aroused me already. I sensed his fingers on my thigh. The shame had been stripped away from me. I licked my lips, biting them, and held his wrist when he placed his hand between my thighs.

A moan escaped my lips when I felt his warm fingers against my burning skin. It felt like sitting in the sun amid the winter. The cold metal with his thick slaver rubbed gently against my skin, making me tighten my fist.

I rolled my head back, pressing against his neck.

"Widen your legs a little," He spoke, and I glanced at him in the mirror. Both of his hands rested between my legs, lifting my skirt and rubbing the metal against my skin. His green eyes locked with mine, stirring a sense of warmth leaking.

Suddenly, he slipped his leg between mine, gently parting them. My heart raced, and I moaned with furrowed brows.

He kept rubbing it against my skin until I no longer felt cold.

"Just a little," He muttered against my ear and slowly slipped a little of an inch-thick dagger's handle inside me. My skin stretched with painful slowness and pleasuring pain, wrecking me into pieces. A slight smile appeared, and he planted a few kisses on my neck. His hand froze right there until the pain subsided, and my body craved for more. I felt his fingers on my skin, making me feel needy right now.

I could not help but move myself against his finger. It felt wet. My eyes closed as I thought about the sensations climbing the mountains of my spine. Slowly, steadily, one after another gentle glide on his fingers, I felt what I had been missing all these years. My body suddenly felt alive. The bones, the blood, and the pores had been excavated after centuries of abolition.

He gradually began to slide the dagger into me, thrusting it softly and slowly, intensifying everything for me.

I gripped his wrist tightly. A loud moan escaped my lips. “Aannhhhhhhhh,"

"I want a lot of sweetness dripping over it," His lazy words tightened my stomach, pulling me back from the edge. I dug my nails into his wrist out of frustration.

He kissed my neck as a reward, calming me and guiding me back to the structure of release he was creating slowly and carefully.

When my hips found a rhythm to move against it, he replaced his fingers with the thumb of his other hand, the one holding the dagger, and moved his hand to my waist. His palm felt large and tanned compared to my size and skin.

He strolled up, pulling the hem of my blouse, making me look at my bosom as he cupped one. It fits perfectly that I look into his eyes, reflected in the mirror as he looks at me.

"The next time you have any doubts, come to me directly; it would be pleasuring for both of us," His words made me close my eyes, and I felt him pressing against my breast harder this time.

I struggled against him. It was too much to bear. I felt as if I were hanging by a thread, yearning for a release.

"Ahhhhhhhh," A loud moan escaped my lips as he suddenly cupped my neck and tilted it backward, stretching my spine to make me look into his eyes above me.

"Next time, I want you naked in my bed, struggling under me," He muttered against my lips, brushing them teasingly, and I shattered, feeling the wildest sensations crawling over me me.

He suddenly wrapped his hand around me as I lost my balance from the powerful shudders hitting me like ocean waves.

I panted loudly as he slowly removed the dagger.

I lost my weight against him, resting my head on his chest. My skirt fell to my feet, covering my legs once more, and I looked at him, rubbing the wet, slick handle of the dagger against my red cheek.

I timidly closed my eyes, and the next moment made me feel out of this world.

He leaned in closer to my cheek, stuck out his tongue, and licked it, cleaning my cheek dirtily. He gulped and pressed his lips against my cheek, kissing me. But suddenly.

“Suman,” Daadisa’s voice grabbed my attention, causing me to shiver in fear. I shifted my weight on my feet and looked at him in confusion.

"Suman, open the door. They arrived,"

I felt a flutter of fear in my stomach as he smirked at me.

He wiped my cheek with his palm and kissed me again before saying, “Let me help.”

I gulped nervously and looked at him, setting the dagger on the table before adjusting my blouse. I gathered my hair in my hand as he began tying the strings of my blouse.

"You do not look angry now," I tried to say, and he smiled.

“I get angry whenever I feel low on sugar.” he said, making my cheeks blush. I lowered my gaze. After finishing the blouse, he turned to look at me and gently pulled me into a warm hug. I immediately wrapped my arms around him and closed my eyes.

“Suman,” Daadisa called again, and I responded. “I’m coming, Daadisa,”

He kissed the top of my head and said slowly while stroking my back, “All the best.”

Confused, I furrowed my brows and leaned back from him, gazing into his eyes. “What do you mean?” I attempted to ask, and he gazed wickedly back into my eyes.

“One is dead for you, another is dying for you, and one is outside waiting to die for you,”

Agastya

At times, you desire something very deeply in your life. You pray for it every moment, craving it intensely. Sometimes, it feels as if not getting it would bring your life to an end. You endure it, watching the days pass by as time slips through your fingers. The urgency intensifies, the hunger grows, and your stomach feels both empty and yet full. You cannot describe what is happening, nor do you realize it is taking place. You confront your deepest fear: failure, the collapse of your life, when you long for something dearly, but life has planned something entirely different for you.

I went through this nearly three years ago. A beautiful young woman captured my heart. My first glimpse of her was awash in the early morning orange hues. I bounced in sync with my horse while crossing the grassy fields on the outskirts of Suryagarh. It was just another day, and I was returning from one of my encounters with the Prince of a small state.

Her convoy walked along the muddy road. As I approached the palanquin, furrowing my brow, I noticed a beautiful princess peeking outside. Her eyes resembled a doe's, her face small, her brows thick, her smile bright, and her standards high.

My heart raced as my horse slowed down. I gazed at her, absorbing every glance offered in that moment.

But as soon as she disappeared from view, my troubled past dragged me back to reality. Clinging to the hope that she might understand and trust me, I started looking for her.

I found her at a friend's wedding. A month-long celebration drew us closer, transforming us from strangers into friends. However, when I tried to shift from friends to lovers by sharing my past, she shattered my heart with just a few words.

"You are a manwhore, and I will die before getting married to one,"

I returned home, trying to overcome my persistent thoughts about her. Her words cut deep, brutally. However, the fact that she made a choice and I was not the one helped me move on from her.

For days, I questioned myself. I hated myself because I wasn't the one she wanted. I wasn't good enough. I didn't measure up. I sank deep into a well of negative thoughts, believing that nobody deserved someone like me.

Until I met a pair of eyes that looked at me from the other side. The gaze seemed worried for me, happy for me, not questioning, but she still didn't know everything about me.

"What do you mean?" she asked, and I couldn't help but gaze into her eyes, attempting to dissolve the memory that still haunted me with a smile.

"One is dead for you, the other is dying for you, and one is waiting outside to die for you," I murmured slowly, gazing into her hazy eyes, flushed cheeks, and those beautifully red lips that appeared a thousand times more alluring after an orgasm.

She gulped nervously and furrowed her brow, her face filled with questions. "What do you mean? Please don't tell me you're going to kill him," she whispered slowly. I pulled her closer in a gentle hug, saying, "You need to make a choice for yourself. Everyone deserves better."

I didn't come here to act on impulse. I wanted to see her before leaving for Mehrangarh. However, things slightly spiraled out of control, and it occurred. The soft spot I had for her was growing. It was taking up so much space that I could barely remind myself that I might end up disappointing her.

But that will never change the fact that I care for her. I always will.

"Suman," Daadisa's voice caught our attention again, and I knew she had something to say. She looked at me with confusion, so I nodded and put a smile back on my face.

"I hope you find it interesting,"

She rolled her eyes in disbelief and pushed me away. "Go," I bit my lower lip. I didn't know why, but my heart felt as if it were breaking as I watched her leave. I wanted to talk to her, to tell her, to listen to her, and to keep her close, but that didn't seem appropriate right now.

I wanted to keep her, but not because I could. I wanted her to stay, to remain even after knowing everything about me, after seeing all of me: my broken self, my worried self, my angry self, my careless self, my childish self, my mature self— all the versions of me that had barely been seen by anyone.

I wanted her to stay after everything and with a choice.

The choice that was waiting outside for her might be better than me. Still, I couldn't keep her just because I could.

I wanted her to express her refusal to this marriage proposal on her own.

Nothing is more beautiful than having a choice; otherwise, there is no point.

I made my own choices and stood here before her. If this was the opportunity God was offering me after the heartbreak, I wanted her to make her own choices and stand before me.

I intertwined my fingers with hers. My heart was aching to claim her lips, to make her mine, to taste every inch of her, and to make her feel that she owns me—though she needed to know she owns me, not just that we are tied together.

She widened her eyes, giving me a silent signal to leave, and I nodded, stepping away from her. I walked outside through the window, stealing a few glances at her, savoring the exquisite taste and scent of her presence.

My heart ached. Perhaps this was the last time we would meet. I had desired this for a long time. I wanted to learn about all the pain she had buried inside her. I wanted to make her feel special.

But, for that, this bridge needed to be crossed.

I walked back to Eklavya and saw him waiting at the main entrance of the Kingdom. The palace buzzed with visitors, the feast still ongoing, and joy seemed to fill the air.

This was the perfect opportunity to reach Mehrangarh before the head commander came back.

Everyone was so busy that they wouldn't even notice we were gone.

I mounted my horse, and we both began racing toward Mehrangarh, hiding our faces.

We needed something real as evidence now.

The sun descended in the west to rest, and we reached the outskirts of Mehrangarh just as darkness enveloped the light like a blanket.

We both dressed in the clothes of a Mehrangarh soldier that Eklavya managed to steal from the soldier who visited Mahabaleshgarh for the feast with Princess Rashmika.

We could not enter through the main door; instead, we walked toward the back of the Kingdom. It was darker, and people were heading back to their chambers to sleep, so we chose a stop that would connect us directly to the weapons warehouse.

During my previous visit, I understood most of the infrastructure of the Kingdom. The warehouse was in the back, so if a war occurs, they could break the large wall for easy and quick access to the weapons while pretending to be unarmed to all the visitors.

It seems we couldn't break through the two—foot—thick wall, but we could dig down.

We both started digging, choosing a safer spot away from the watchers. The plan was to dig and create a small cave under the wall that would open on the other side.

By the time we finished, it had grown darker, and thankfully, no one noticed.

We filled the hollow space with some mud, not entirely, because we needed to get out too.

We crawled slowly into the Kingdom. There were a few soldiers watching nearby. I waited for them to move slightly to drink water and then ran towards the warehouse without making a sound.

My heartbeats were racing.

And it raced even faster when we both discovered the lock on the warehouse door.

"What do we do now?"

Eklavya whispered, and I wiped the sweat from my forehead.

I gulped nervously and looked at a huge lock. I didn't have anything to put inside, and then suddenly, I remembered my lady luck.

I drew my dagger and removed the sheath. It was a sharp blade with a curved tip. I offered a brief prayer and slowly inserted the blade's tip into the keyhole.

It got stuck a little, and I tried to figure out the locks. Because of the blade's thinness, it managed to slip in with some effort, and I attempted to unlock it.

Suddenly, the worn footsteps of soldiers grabbed my attention, and we both shared a fearful glance.

I quickly pulled the blade out, and we both stood next to the door.

The soldier looked at us and said, "I'm going to sleep for a while. Keep your eyes open."

We both nodded, playing wise like the soldiers of Mehrangarh, and he walked away from there.

I took a deep breath and we both started over.

This time it slid inside quickly, and I turned the blade to unlock it. I returned the blade to the sheath, and he opened the door, taking the lock inside with him.

I knew she was lucky to have me. A smile spread across my face unexpectedly.

But it disappeared as soon as we stepped into the dark warehouse.

Eklavya closed the door behind him, and I tried to find the lamp.

I bumped into the table in the pitch-black darkness, and after a few tries, my fingers found the lamp. Oddly, it was hot. This suggests someone had been here before us.

"We need to find stones," I said slowly to Eklavya. He struggled a bit while I gathered some dry grass. We both attempted to ignite it. I was sweating.

My fingers turned cold, aware of how much was at risk.

Suddenly, the dry grass ignited, and I used it to light the torch.

The warehouse room brightened slightly, and Eklavya blew out the grass fire, covering it with sand so no one would discover it. We walked around, examining the iron shelves, which held some scrolls, mortar, and a few other items. In the middle, there was a stone table, and I stepped closer to it it.

"Begin examining the scrolls and documents," I told him.

As I walked into the warehouse, there were swords, spears, bows, arrows, and many other weapons. However, when I stepped in, my feet suddenly felt a different surface.

My brows drew together in a line.

I stepped back in this place; it felt hollow.

The tension mounted in my mind. I bit my lip and called out slowly, “Eklavya,”

He walked over to me, and I signaled for him to step onto this small surface. He also looked confused.

“There is something,” he said. We both knelt down, rubbing the sand off until our fingers felt a three—foot—long and wide iron door to the basement.

“Bastards,” I muttered, trying to feel normal. It was fine. I hated small, hidden places; they shortened my breaths.

I gulped, and gathering my courage, we both opened it and looked at the rope ladder hanging inside.

“We should go inside,” I said, even though I felt scared. We couldn’t see where it would take us.

I entered first, then Eklavya followed.

One after another, we went nearly a full length deep into it. It was small, but when we reached the lowest point, our eyes remained stunned.

We couldn’t see a wall. It was open, wide open. As long as we could see through the darkness and the light of the lamp.

Eklavya suddenly grabbed my hand, and we began to move a little further.

Then, suddenly, we spotted six to seven-foot-long iron tubes, or perhaps cylinders, which were not too wide but tapered from one end to the other.

“What’s this?” I asked as Eklavya touched my shoulder, poking me. Lifting my gaze, I followed his as he asked, “What the hell is that?” I felt shaken. My throat went dry.

My eyes widened in shock and then narrowed to improve my vision in the dim light from the lamp that barely reached far. It was pitch black, massive, dangerous, and something I had never seen or heard of before.

"It looks dangerous," Eklavya said in his slow, frightened voice, and I turned around to see that this wasn’t the only one. There were many, even hundreds.

As I stepped closer to it, I gulped in fear and nervousness. It had wheels and a long tube—the same one I had seen in abundance.

Gazing at its long cylindrical design, I remembered the gun Rashmika had given me. It fired gunpowder, and I sensed this was precisely the same model—just the more dangerous and destructive version, as I had guessed.

"It’s meant to blast gunpowder," I said, looking at Eklavya, who was furrowing his brows at me. "The one you tested, right?"

I nodded. "Hmm."

“But this one would cause major destruction; it could kill many at once,” I stated, and he asked, confused, "How do you know about that?"

I licked my dry lips and looked at him. "Look at their size. Gunpowder is explosive; it detonates like a volcano when it comes into contact with fire. It burns, kills people with ease and brutality, and there are hundreds of them here," I explained in a slow voice, and he nodded, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He looked scared, obviously more than I was.

"But there must be a way to get them out," I said, glancing around as he furrowed his brows.

"What do you mean?" he asked, biting his lips. His cheeks had reddened; the fear was evident in his eyes.

"I mean, they can’t get them out through this secret passage with a rope stair. They’re heavy; they would need people to push them out in large numbers, and there must be a way to slide them out since they have wheels," I attempted to explain. Suddenly, he said, gulping, "Do you know how dangerous this is? These things could blow the whole Kingdom away, and I don’t know what the hell we’re doing—"

"Yes," I interrupted him firmly.

His eyes widened in shock. "What?" he stammered, swallowing hard.

"There are things that could blow the whole Kingdom away."

"No, no, no, no... Agastya. It's too dangerous, brutal, and destructive," he said, stepping closer to me, and I shook my head.

"It's not. It’s our defense. We have nothing personal against Mehrangarh, but they’re assisting those invaders, and this is our response. They’re considering using these in the war, and if we can destroy them, then we’ve already won half the battle," I tried to persuade him, but he shook his head.

"You realize that this whole Kingdom could go up in flames?" He put his hand on my shoulder, his eyes wide.

"Then what do you want? Would it be better if my brothers, family, your family, Pratapgarh, Mahabaleshgarh, all the princely states, and the entire population were at risk? Try to be sensible, Eklavya. We can’t combat these monsters with swords. We either need this gunpowder and these machines, or we fight until we’re all dead individually. If we don’t stop them, they will capture Mehrangarh first, then all the Kingdoms one by one. So it’s better if we blow them all up before they can even strike," I concluded, trying hard to make him understand, but he tightened his jaw and slowly shook his head.

"People are in Mehrangarh, too. We don’t know how dangerous they are. Maybe we’re only considering the Palace, but what if a large population gets harmed, too?" he said, and I took a deep breath, acknowledging his perspective.

"Then we’ll have to wait until they take them out into an open area where we can destroy them," I replied, and he nodded.

"Yes, that would be better, and we still need to find out where they’re hiding the explosives, like that gunpowder," he inquired, and I gulped, scanning the surroundings.

"We should walk through and see what else is here and where this place leads,” I suggested. He nodded but suddenly

stopped me.

"But, Agastya, what if this place doesn't open nearby and leads us far away from here?" he asked, and I bit my lip, considering it.

"I don't think so," I replied, walking toward the nearest wall. The temperature was colder here than outside; it wasn't just freezing but watery cold, and there was moisture in the air.

It was confirmed as I placed my hand on the wall, feeling the dampness in the stones. This cave didn't have mud but stone walls.

"It doesn't seem like a man-made space. It feels more natural. Look at the stone walls, the uneven floor, and the packed mud and stones. It's like a vast compound here, sloping upward," I remarked, furrowing my brows, and he followed my gaze, agreeing with me.

"You're right. What do you think then?" he asked.

"I believe it's a groundwater channel that has now dried up. There should be an opening nearby, perhaps a large dig for a well. They likely discovered this place because of that. Additionally, this passage probably isn't very long since laborers can't work and push for long periods in this dark, airless condition," I explained, and he nodded.

"I agree; we should find the well or the place where they'll take them outside to use, since it's meant to be hidden," he added, nodding.

"I believe they won't get it out until the soldiers of that army arrive here. If Mehrangarh's laborers got involved, the news would leak eventually, but if that army deployed their soldiers, it could stay a secret," I added, and he shook his head in confusion.

"But wouldn't they recognize those people? I mean, there are thousands of people in their territory, and no one would notice?" And I shook my head.

"No, if they're wearing what we are wearing—Mehrangarh's clothes," I said, and he sucked on his lips, nodding thoughtfully.

Honestly, it was all overwhelming at this point. I couldn't believe they orchestrated all this right under our noses while making us feel confident about marrying their daughter, Rashmika. I could barely wrap my head around it.

Seeing its scale, I felt compelled to alert all the kingdoms to keep their armies on standby, because anything could happen. However, notifying them too soon would be unwise; they wouldn't fully understand the gravity of the situation—the extent of destruction and the lives at stake. We needed to be strategic rather than emotional.

Eklavya and I started walking through the passage, picking a side. The air was thin here, and I could feel it pressing against my chest. The oil burned as we stepped forward, slowly taking in the surroundings and the uneven ground beneath us. The temperature was gradually rising, indicating that we were nearing the surface.

I didn't know how long we had been walking. The darkness was deepening, making it hard to see. It was a vast, hollow space, and every slight noise echoed around us. Thankfully, we had chosen to come here at night; otherwise, people might have discovered us.

We kept walking and felt a refreshing breeze.

"The opening is near," I said, and we both began to look around. But there was no passage in sight. I glanced upward.

"Look," I said, catching his attention. We both stared up at the empty, round, dry well.

"So, you were right. It's a dry well," he said, and I nodded, swallowing hard.

"But I think there must be an opening for a river—a dried-up groundwater river. This area is close to mountains, which typically indicates the presence of rivers. There's a possibility they're using that opening to remove that massive object," I explained, and he nodded.

"Right, I agree with you," he said.

"And it has to be close, you know," I said, and he took a deep breath.

"We don't have much time. The lamp will go out soon," he said, and I felt a creeping fear run down my spine. We could get lost here forever without a light. We had no idea where we started, and we hadn't marked anything on the walls for fear of attracting attention.

My breaths were coming short. The cold flushed my cheeks red, and my fingers felt numb. My feet hurt, but we kept walking to find the riverbed opening.

Suddenly, we noticed a slope descending, accompanied by distant sounds—like rustling waves, hinting at water.

A shiver ran down my spine as I took a deep breath and looked at him.

"I believe there's a live underground river nearby," I said, and his eyes widened in surprise.

"You know, first of all, I never want to die. If I did, I'd want to die in battle—not drowned in water where no one could find my body," he replied, and I placed my hand on his shoulder.

"Nothing will happen, trust me," I reassured him as I took his hand and led the way.

We quickened our pace as we went down the steep slope, but suddenly we both slipped in the muddy ground.

My heart raced as I tightened my grip on his hand. We fell, losing control of our bodies. Uncontrollable screams escaped our

mouths as the lamp slipped from my fingers, landing in the water ahead. This wasn't just a river; it resembled a vast ocean. It was terrifying.

I couldn't think clearly. I quickly drew my dagger from its sheath and drove it into the solid ground, gripping the handle tightly. We slowed our descent and panted heavily.

We were terrified, and death seemed imminent.

"I need to go home," Eklavya exclaimed, causing me to chuckle.

"You're the head commander of Suryagarh's army," I reminded him, and he shook his head in response.

"This isn't a battle or a training exercise," we both smiled at each other, calming our breaths as we leaned our backs against the sloping surface.

The sound of rushing water sent chills up our spines.

"This wouldn't be the opening for those machines. The water flow is heavy, and it doesn't seem like its passage can be changed," Eklavya said, and I nodded in agreement.

"You're right," I panted. "We should walk back to the spot where we had two choices," I suggested, and he nodded. We slowly crawled back, our clothes becoming caked in mud. My fingers were shaking now. We had narrowly escaped death.

My lips dried out, and our lamp was out, too. However, it felt like morning now as a faint brightness illuminated this place.

We continued back and selected another spot. The light grew brighter with each step, and after a long, exhausting, cold, and perilous walk, we finally found the large opening of a dry riverbed.

Clearly, it was dry because the ground sloped upwards, unlike a living river, which slopes downwards.

Wait a moment! That meant a river was coming from above, which could only mean one thing: this river was flowing down from the mountains. We were close to the mountains.

This location was perfect for delivering the gunpowder and those enormous, destructive machines.

Although I didn't know why, an idea clicked in my mind. The possibility of this river going underground after it came from the mountains suggested a river was running through the mountains. It wouldn't be surprising if the army used this river to traverse the mountains.

"Fuck!" I muttered, and Eklavya stared at me in disbelief.

"What?" he asked as we stepped out of the dry riverbed passage.

"We should head back home," I said gradually.

With my flushed cheeks, I looked back at the mirror to see myself again before heading to the door. But my gaze lingered on the faint red bruise on my neck. My fingers brushed over it, rubbing my skin in anticipation, which made me inhale sharply in confusion.

This was unexpected.

Did something happen?

I lowered my gaze to check my hands, legs, back, and shoulders, and aside from this bruise, there wasn't a single mark on me, triggering a memory that clouded my mind.

His lips were on my neck.

The intensity of his breath, the grip of his hands, and the warm moisture between my legs—everything felt both too fast and too slow. It seemed like we had spent just a few moments together, yet my memory captured every detail in thousands of images.

His swollen lips, lustful green eyes, the touch of his fingers on my core—everything was overwhelming.

"Suman!"

Daadisa's voice pulled me from my thoughts. I gulped nervously and moved towards the door. I draped my Dupatta over my head, trying to cover the bright red mark with the hem.

Inhaling deeply to muster courage, I placed my palms on the handle and opened the door.

Daadisa's eyes shifted from frustration to shock, then quickly to awe.

Her eyes filled with tears as she cupped my cheeks and kissed my forehead.

"You look breathtaking. Forget this soldier; let me find you a Prince,"

A wave of laughter swept through the attendees watching us, tightening my heart with her words. The laughter faded from my mind, but I forced a smile onto my face.

"Come with me,"

She said, leading me out and asking me to sit on the couch.

I watched her retrieve minimal jewelry for me, a beautiful smile gracing her lips. She sat beside me on the couch, extending her hand to hold mine. Starting with the bangles, she said,

"I know it didn't go as planned last time, but nothing is more beautiful than having hope,"

I silently gulped and bit my lip.

I understood that hope could be beautiful yet also bring immense pain, often more than reality itself.

"Hope is beautiful, Daadisa, but when it shatters, the world feels too big to escape. It feels like being trapped in a box, suffocated. Trusting again becomes incredibly difficult,"

I attempted to explain slowly, and she lifted her gaze to meet mine.

"I know how it feels when hope dies. I was married to him, spending my life managing the Kingdom and politics while he was busy with the same until his last breath. When everything started to settle—the children married, grandchildren blessed our lives—I thought we would enjoy our old age in peace, but he left me alone,"

I lowered my gaze, listening to her. Her fingers trembled with the frailty of old age, yet hope shone brightly in her eyes.

"And when I was finally recovering from his loss, making peace with life again, Raj left us,"

She continued, tears welling in her eyes, and I felt a lump forming in my throat. I gently held her hands, caressing them slowly.

"But sometimes, we are so consumed by the wildfire that we fail to realize it brings new seeds to grow, new lives to begin, and new greenery to flourish in our lives,"

She smiled weakly, and I tried to smile back.

"You are too young to give up on life, Suman. You did your best. While he was alive, you stayed by his side, even when he chose someone else over you. You never cheated, disrespected, or hurt him. Now that he is gone, there is no burden on you, and you are young enough to believe in love again,"

She said, and I inhaled deeply at the mention of the word 'love.'

Painful memories clouded my mind, dark clouds filled with pain, horror, and sacrifice made me clench my fists.

"What if it's not love again?"

I asked timidly, meeting her eyes. Her brows furrowed.

"What could it be then?"

She asked, her voice slow.

"A need, attachment, attraction—anything that feels short-lived. What if it's just a thread tying us together from each end, making it impossible to escape each other yet also impossible to leave together?"

My throat felt tight as I spoke slowly, and she swallowed quietly, gazing at me.

"That's exactly what I meant when I talked about giving life another chance. You will never know until it happens. Trusting once is easy, but giving another chance is the real battle—not against others, but within yourself. You will constantly judge that

journey, whether it's a person or life itself, watching every step so closely that you'll miss the essence because you're too busy critiquing it to feel the happiness it can bring, "

She said, leaving me too stunned to respond. The image of his face and green eyes blurred through my thoughts. Maybe Daadisa was right; I had been too rigid in my thinking and closing myself off over time.

Perhaps I should place my trust not in individuals but in life itself, waiting until it leads me to him.

I nodded silently, and she smiled, gently touching my head.

"Come with me,"

She didn't ask me to wear anything but bangles. I took the dupatta and adjusted it over my brow. Honestly, I felt nothing—absolutely nothing. Not even a hint of excitement. I knew where I belonged, even if the doors were closed.

I walked out with her to a meeting hall where couches were arranged throughout the space. I noticed a tall man standing as we arrived.

"Please, be seated," Daadisa said, and I helped her sit down on the couch. She held my hand, pulling me closer to sit beside her.

I remained silent as they began to speak.

"Pranam, Rajmata," I heard a deep voice, and Daadisa replied, "Pranam, Bhan Singh." She turned slightly towards me. "This is Suman," I couldn't help but bring my palms together to greet him.

"Ji, Pranam," he responded slowly, and I heard a woman beside him ask Daadisa a few questions about me, to which she replied politely. Daadisa was a humble woman; she knew that if she ordered him to marry me, he would, but she wanted the best for me. That's why she was putting in extra effort to build this relationship.

And suddenly, she said, "Suman, take him inside and ask him whatever you want to." My eyes widened in shock, and I sat in silence, immobile.

She elbowed me a little, and I gulped nervously, standing up. He also stood, and I clenched my fists, silently walking inside, hearing his footsteps follow me.

I looked around to see if Kunwarsa Agsatya was there. I didn't know if he was too angry to do anything.

"Umm, are you comfortable?" I heard him ask slowly, and I turned to look at him, nodding slowly.

"Please, have a seat," I managed to say, gesturing towards the couch as I watched him sit down.

There was a long pause before he began.

"Um, are you happy with this marriage?" he asked in a quiet voice, and I bit my lip nervously.

"Please, sit down; you don't have to keep standing," he added, and I walked over to the other couch across from him and sat down.

"I have to tell you something," I managed to say, but my voice came out slow and a bit hoarse. The heat Kunwarsa Agastya had left me with still warmed my head, and I felt a slight soreness between my legs, making me shift a little on the couch.

"Yes?" he prompted, his voice slow as well. I clenched my hands to gather my strength and managed to say slowly, "I can't marry you."

There was a long, awkward silence until he asked, his tone upset, "Oh, why? If you're comfortable answering."

I blinked nervously. "I'm already tied to someone," I said, trying to keep my gaze steady. He frowned in confusion.

"Married?" he asked. I swallowed hard and shook my head.

"Not exactly," I replied.

"Will you keep this between us and deny the marriage? I can't because I respect Daadisa a lot, and I can't tell anyone about it," I added, my voice trembling and struggling to find the right words.

He nodded.

"I will," he said. I inhaled deeply.

"When my first husband died, his family tried to force me to burn myself along with his body as part of a ritual in our tribe. But a man saved my life; to do so, he had to put vermillion in my hair. I mean, we aren't properly married, but I'm tied to him in a way that I wouldn't be able to find peace in my heart if I even think about anyone else."

My voice came out slowly, and he remained silent for a moment. My heart raced, and he said in a slow voice, "But I wouldn't have a problem with it."

I gulped nervously now and shook my head.

He didn't have a problem with it, but I knew Kunwarsa would, and I had a problem. I couldn't fool him when I was falling for Kunwar Agastya.

"You don't understand. I can't marry anyone," I managed to say, and he inhaled deeply, remaining silent for a moment.

"Okay, I'll tell Rajmata," he said.

I immediately stood up and said, "But please don't tell her what I shared. She would be devastated to know."

He nodded weakly, and I watched him walk out of the room.

I stayed there until I saw Daadisa walk in with a sad expression. I waited quietly, and she hugged me tightly.

"It's okay, but we'll find another man, one even better than him, for you. He was an idiot," she said, and I tried to look upset.

She released me from the hug and cupped my cheeks.

"You must be tired. You should rest, and I think you're getting rashes too," she said, and my cheeks warmed up suddenly. I cupped my neck and shook my head, which made her furrow her brows in confusion.

"Are you okay, Suman?"

I nodded silently and said slowly, "Umm, Daadisa, Nandani must be looking for me."

Then I walked away from there, honestly running away.

I went to the kitchen and busied myself with work. I didn't meet anyone after that because of the red bruise visible on my neck. I didn't care about the guests, but I couldn't let Nandani, Princess Aishwarya, or even Ranaji see it.

After everything, I returned to my room, exhausted.

The night grew darker, but the chaos remained. The melody of music and dance had enchanted the Kingdom to another level. Nandani didn't send anyone to call me. Maybe she knew I was with Daadisa.

And I did not encounter him after our minor incident, which was not small at all. Strangely, I felt something different in my gut. It was a happy moment in the kingdom, yet a kind of war was raging in my head. I did not feel hungry; rather, I sensed that something was wrong.

Did he go somewhere? He acted differently today. There was an unusual silence on his face. It seemed like he was worried about something.

I could not rest amidst the rustling thoughts and stepped out of the room to keep myself busy with various tasks. The more I occupied myself, the more I thought I would find peace.

But, moment by moment, my peace morphed into worry and panic as I searched for him throughout the kingdom and couldn't find him anywhere. I even tried asking a few attendees on behalf of Ranaji, but nobody had seen him. Where the hell did he go?

Agastya

I watched the orange hues of the early morning blend into the bright sunlight with each step we took to figure out the directions to Suryagarh. Our wet, dirty clothes covered in mud dried.

We had walked several miles away from the river opening we had discovered. The mountains were close by, and so was the threat.

The sound of the river flowing was noticeable, and we walked toward it to catch a glimpse.

"There it is," Eklavya's voice caught my attention, and I swallowed to moisten my throat. I was hungry, too. But we kept climbing the small mountain until we finally spotted the sparkling blue water running through the hills.

I sighed deeply as my heart sank with fear.

It was a wide river capable of accommodating many boats without issue. The rain wouldn't come for another three months, meaning the season was non-flood, and the water passage would be safe.

"We are done," I said, sitting on the muddy hill against the tree, taking in a view that could soothe many but felt like heartbreak to me.

I didn't know what to do now. I hadn't imagined it would be this significant; the entire planning and our people conspired against us for power.

I closed my eyes, unable to process the sensation. A tightness in my chest and a chill crept over my skin.

Amid all this, only two good things had happened in my life: my niece and my wife.

I thought I would spend time with them today, but it seemed like we had little time left. The threat turned out to be more dangerous than I had envisioned.

"We should head back home," Eklavya said, catching my attention. I looked at him with a faint smile.

"Yes, we should."

"And we need to discuss it with everyone so that they'll be prepared," he added, and I stood up, offering him a hand.

"We will. Everyone is in Suryagarh, and despite it going against my heart, we still have to shatter everyone's cheerful facade," I said as we turned back to find horses tied around the Mehrangarh in someone's grass fields, ready for a feast.

It turned to afternoon by the time we found them during our walk.

Wasting no more time, we began our journey back home.

Darkness overtook the bright sun, turning it into midnight by the time we arrived. We quietly left our horses in the stable, and I walked back to my chamber without drawing anyone's attention.

After taking a long bath, I stepped out to sit in my open private garden attached to the chamber, hoping to shake off the cold.

I gathered some wooden pieces and lit a fire before sitting in silence. Today, there was a different kind of peace—a silence akin to tiring sleep after a grand celebration. Everyone had retreated to their chambers, and I noticed an attendee walking in.

"Shall we get you something to eat, Kunwarsa?" she asked, and I nodded weakly in response. "Umm, can you ask Suman to meet me?"

Her eyes lowered, and she nodded silently. She was the same attendee who had seen both of us together.

Honestly, right now, I don't care about anything.

Things were worse. We could be dead in less than a month. And after death—fear, happiness, and judgments—nothing would matter. It felt like I had only these three weeks to live my life fully.

No, I hadn't accepted failure, but the possibility was fifty-fifty, and it would be foolish to deny that we could die since there was only a small chance we could escape the end.

I waited until I heard her faded footsteps. I felt my hitched breath return as I looked at her.

She said nothing and silently sat beside me. The soft crackling of wood catching the fire filled our ears like a melody amid the dark silence.

She pulled her knees closer and wrapped her arms around them, making me notice the beautiful guava-green bangles on her wrist.

There was only a two-foot gap between us, which I closed by taking her hand and gently pulling her closer to me.

She didn't hesitate or protest. I wrapped my arms around her, gathering her into my embrace. Her back pressed against my chest, and I shielded her with my shawl, leaving our faces exposed. "How did it go?" I asked softly, resting my chin on her shoulder. She gulped and closed her eyes, our cheeks grazing one another.

After a deep breath, she muttered, "I rejected him."

I silently gulped and held her hands in mine beneath the warm shawl.

Silence enveloped me as I closed my eyes, inhaling her essence with each breath. Her sweet, captivating natural scent surrounded me. There was a peculiar comfort in her embrace, something that transcended soothing.

Or maybe I had never felt anything like this with any woman before. Well, I had never experienced this with anyone before.

I didn't know, but with her, it felt like I could remain natural and silent and express my pain.

"Suman," I called slowly, and she responded with a soft hum. "Ji," her voice tightened my chest. It was lazy, giving, and primarily divine. I felt her fingers intertwining with mine, strong as if she were filling me with strength.

I gulped with a slight weakness and a lump in my throat.

"Why did you reject him?" My voice was slow, audible only to her. She tilted her head slightly to the side, nestling into my neck. The warmth of her face made me feel lost in a world where no one could reach me, but she found me only.

“I cannot marry anyone,” her soft voice brushed against my cheek, sending a slight shiver down my spine. Her submission felt like the most beautiful thing in the world.

She was the silence, relief, and answers to my chaos.

“Does that mean you accept me as your husband?” I asked in the same slow voice, and she inhaled audibly, making me feel intense.

“You didn’t give me any option while doing a stunt of cutting your thumb and flooding my hairline with it,” her words brought a smile to my face, reminding me of that day.

“Do you regret it?” I asked lazily, rubbing my thumb against hers inside the shawl.

“Are you making me regret it?” she asked in return, and I chuckled slightly.

"I am trying not to, but it's slowly slipping off my hands,” I said in a slow voice. She opened her eyes and looked at me. Our faces were very closed. We could feel each other's warmth. The night was evident in our secret, charismatic, chaotic meeting in the presence of fire.

The fire that brought us closer and transformed us into something from nothing.

But the distance remained. Many questions lingered unanswered, and somehow, I hesitated to answer them because something more significant demanded our attention.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked slowly, and I gulped nervously, nodding slightly.

She sat up straighter and brushed her braid aside before leaning her back against my chest once more. It felt even more comfortable now and drew her even closer.

“Have you ever hurt a woman, like breaking her heart or doing something she would never forget while toying with her feelings?” Her words unexpectedly made me smile, and I replied slowly.

“Do I look like someone who could do that?” She rubbed her nose against my cheek, shook her head slowly, and muttered. “No, but still,”

I kissed her jaw gently. “No, I’ve never hurt any woman in my life. Breaking a heart is more brutal than killing someone,” I said, and she smiled. “Why?”

I tightened my arms around her; the fire illuminated her face, and she appeared like liquid gold. She looked stunningly beautiful in my embrace.

“Because once you kill someone, they feel pain for a moment and then never feel anything again. But if you break a heart, it hurts for a lifetime,” I muttered slowly, and she kissed my cheek languidly. My gaze dropped with warmth, flushing my cheeks. A woman has never kissed my cheek, not even my mother in my memory.

"Does it still hurt?" she asked, looking into my eyes.

"What?" I replied.

"The heartbreak from the girl," she mentioned, and I bit my lips slightly. "Um, not much, but I lost hope for love after her. I feel like I don’t deserve it," I said slowly, and she chuckled a bit.

"Well, if that’s the case, then I don’t deserve it either, because I’m a woman who was married for eight years, then became a widow, and now a Prince's secret muse." I couldn’t help but chuckle.

"Muse?" I asked, and she laughed softly and nodded.

"Yes, a secret muse, but only when the heart is full of pain or in need," she said, and I closed my eyes, pressing my cheek against her.

"I’m sorry, but you know I can’t tell you about anyone. My relationship with Rashmika serves as my ticket to Mehrangarh. If anyone learns about you, it will all be lost, and we’ll be in trouble, Suman," I said slowly, and she took a deep breath against me. The coldness had seeped away with her warm presence.

"I know, and I don’t want anyone to know about us," she said in a soft voice, and my brows furrowed in confusion.

"Why?" She swallowed hard. "I’m a widow, and people will think I seduced you in this relationship if they find out. I mean, my name is ‘Suman;’ it doesn’t even sound like a Princess," she said, pulling her hand out from under the shawl to show me her palm.

“Look at my palm,” she gulped, pausing briefly. “The lines on my hand, the texture, the feel—all of it comes from my work as an attendant. It doesn’t feel soft; it can’t caress your cheeks. We’re not meant to be together,”

My heart sank deeper with the pain creating space, and I shook my head, bringing her hand close to my cheek and letting her rub it against my skin. “It can, and it feels like the most beautiful hands that have ever caressed me because that’s the only hand that considered doing something more than just…”

My eyes filled with tears, and my heart felt suffocated all of a sudden.

She straightened up slightly and looked into my eyes, which were filled with concern. She cupped my cheek gently and shook her head. “Did something wrong happen to you?” she asked slowly, and I chuckled, swallowing the lump in my throat. I

tried to push the memory away as guilt and regret made me feel weak and disgusting.

“No, nothing,” I managed to say as she inhaled deeply, pressing her back against my chest once more. I closed my eyes, drinking in the comfort through her shoulder and neck. The faint red mark I had left was still visible on her neck.

She kissed my cheek and muttered, “You know, you ruined your life to save mine, so I will never judge you for anything. You are my savior, and to me, you are my God who saved me from the demons. You will never be wrong in my eyes—even if the world stands against you, even if you stand against me, you will still never be wrong for me. But it’s good to take your time,” she said slowly, adding after a brief pause, “I took three years to tell my best friend that my marriage was a failure.”

I smiled weakly. "You mean, Bhabhisa,"

She nodded. "Yes,"

A broad smile suddenly spread across my face. “Okay, so if she knew about us, would she have called me Jijaji?”

And she chuckled unexpectedly. “Kunwarsa,” suddenly, an attendee’s voice caught our attention. “Ji,” I looked in her direction.

“Your dinner is inside,” she said, and we both started to laugh a little. I didn’t know why, but I couldn’t help myself.

"My dinner is in my arms,"

And we burst into laughter.

The attendee appeared confused, bowed slightly, and then walked away.

I looked at her bright, beautiful, and contagious smile and couldn’t help but kiss the side of her lips.

“You must be hungry,” she said slowly, and I grabbed her jaw, murmuring. “You’re not leaving me,”

She gulped, her smile fading. “Someone will find us,” she said, and I shook my head. “I don’t care. I need this night with you, only you,” I stated.

"I do not care. I need this night with you, only you,"

He said in a slow and deep voice, and I felt a tightness in my lower abdomen.

"But, I cannot stay here for the night,"

I tried to say, and he cupped my cheek, making my lips pout, and shook his head.

"I do not care. You are staying here with me. That's it,"

His words made me feel timid a little more. I was already feeling dizzy and childish in his arms. The attendees had seen us, too. I did not know what was going to happen to us now. There could be rumors about us. And he did not care about them.

“But what if someone gets to know?"

I tried to ask slowly, and he leaned in closer and pecked my lips for a moment, making me widen my eyes with shock.

"Let them know,"

He stated and then, after a slight pause, asked.

"Do you want to get inside the bedroom?"

His words reminded me of a few unholy things we did this week. First, he made me feel him, not just his warmth, but his length, hardness and thickness and made me release with the movements in his lap, and then did something I could not even put into words.

The memories alone managed to blush my cheeks and made me nervously lower my gaze.

"Umm, you said... that you... want me to be...na... I mean, you said that next time you... I mean, I need to be naked... in your bed,"

I tried to speak. My voice came out breaking, and he brought his lips closer to mine, making me sink deeper into his left arm, trying to find some space to escape. But he did not let me do anything but listen to his flirtatious Agastya-coded words.

"You can if you want to. It will be amazing to feel your naked presence in my empty bed,"

I gulped nervously and pushed him away a little to stand up.

But he stopped me by holding my wrist. The bangles in my wrist broke with the sudden hold, and he pulled me closer unapologetically. I fell into his lap and felt a shiver run down my spine. My cheeks turned warm, warmer than the fire could ever make.

His hand kept holding my wrist while his gaze looked deeper into mine. The war seemed dangerous. The deep green orbs, having the reflection of flames of fire, looked devilish, even more than a devil itself. There was no glimpse of regret in them for breaking my bangles but a shade of pride.

"Apologize,"

I muttered, trying to pull my hand out of his tight hold. His gaze lowered to my lips, and he gulped, looking at me. The noticeable bone in his neck fell for a mere moment when he swallowed his saliva. It made me weak and desirously itchy in between my legs.

The vision of him licking my cheeks clean after wettening them with my own juices occupied my mind, reminding me how much he was capable of bringing me to my own knees for him.

His gaze softened for a moment, and he muttered.

"Only on one condition,"

I sucked on my lips.

"What condition?"

I managed to ask.

"Come to my bedroom, have dinner and spend the night with me,"

He finished in a slow voice, and I lowered my gaze, feeling timid with the mention of 'spending the night with him'.

"A night?"

My voice fumbled a little. I was not ready for it, not yet, at least.

And, he took a slight pause.

"Not just the night but a life,"

A smile appeared on my face all of a sudden, and I looked at him, looking back at me with the fake innocence dripping off his face.

"Please,"

He muttered with a puppy face, and I nodded, melting with his slow request.

He smiled a little and helped me stand up. I looked at him, collecting the broken pieces of my bangles, and suddenly, he lifted me in his arms.

My eyes widened with shock.

"Kunwarsa,"

He smiled a little and muttered, taking me inside the bedroom.

"ji, Sumanika ji, kya hukum hai aapka?" "Ji, Sumanika Ji, what is your order?" He asked slowly, and I felt my cheeks blushing harder.

"I cannot order you," I tried to say, and he brought my face closer and rubbed his nose against mine.

"You know if you are married to a Prince, you are not less than a Princess, and I should make you feel like one," His words made me smile timidly, and he dropped to my feet slowly after entering the room.

I looked at him, drawing his bedroom curtains to announce privacy. The attendees would not walk inside after seeing the drawn curtains, even if anything would happen to the world outside.

I stayed silent and watched him walking towards the couch, asking me. "Come here, Sumanika Ji,"

I bit on my lips and strolled after him towards the couch, trying to hide my smile. He signalled me to sit with him, and I gave in without a war.

He had won. Already. Way before I could know.

As I sat down, he shifted closer and looked at me.

"Was that man good?" He asked in a slow voice, and I gulped silently, not knowing what to answer. And I shook my head slowly.

"The only man I have ever known is Kunwar Agastya Dev Singh. No man would ever be good as much as he is good to me. So, he was not," I could not stop myself from saying it. His lips spread into a slight smile.

And it was the truth that no one could change for me. There were hundreds of men as I lay on the pyre, waiting to be burned alive, but he was the only man, the true man, present there.

"You know, you do not have to say that. That was what was needed at that moment," He stated, pulling the plate.

“And you could have made it so I don’t exist anymore. But here I am, in your chamber, on your couch, watching you have your dinner and seeing you taste something I didn’t know existed in my body.”

His gaze lowered, and he bit his lip. “You know you’re making me crave my sweetness again.” His lips were captivatingly wet and sweet in that moment. The teeth pressing against them flooded me with butterflies in my stomach, and his words made me blush.

I quickly averted my gaze, realizing what my thoughts focused on.

He was enslaving me. I fisted my hands on my skirt. His absence had always made me feel tempted to him even more. After waiting for him madly and insanely for days, it felt like having your favorite thing.

“Your absence hurts me,” I managed to say, and he briefly closed his eyes, inhaling deeply.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to go either,” he muttered slowly, tearing off a bite of food.

“Then why are you leaving so often if it’s not that bad? I didn’t even know you would leave after that... between us,” I tried to say, and he looked at me with a weak smile.

“I just wanted to see you before I left. I’m really sorry if it seemed like I used you for my pain or something else. I didn’t come to you for that; I just… wanted to be with you. Like, lock your image in my heart,” he stammered slowly, his words fumbling as I watched his clenched hands resting on his thighs. My brows furrowed with concern at his altered expressions.

I reached out to hold his hand. It felt cold—a strange contrast after we had just warmed up by the fire.

“What’s wrong?” I managed to ask, and he looked at me with worried eyes. There was a slight pause before he muttered, “Everything.”

I lowered my gaze, recalling our first conversation after our unfinished wedding.

"Elaborate," I asked, and he smiled all of a sudden.

“I’m dying to kiss you. That’s the biggest problem. Then I wonder what it would feel like to be fed by you. The most complicated issue is figuring out how I’ll maintain my boundaries while being intimate with you.” His words made me roll my eyes and sigh deeply.

He could never be serious.

But, above all, I could make him feel what it would be like to be fed by me.

I smiled, turned to him, and scooted closer, bringing the plate nearer to me.

Tearing the bite, I reached out my hands to him, causing him to pull his face back slightly. My brows furrowed in confusion.

"Chakhke batao, jehar hua to?" “Taste it first; what if it’s poisoned?”

I gritted my teeth, took that bite, and shook my head. ***"Nahi hai jehar, laadle kunwarsa, aap kha sakte hai,"*** “Not poisoned, darling Kunwarsa, you can have it,” I said, and he chuckled softly before taking the next bite.

“You are so sweet through and through,” his words suddenly created a knot in my stomach. My breath caught for a moment. How could he be both dirty and innocent at the same time? Mostly cute.

I offered another bite, but he shook his head. “Recheck the poison,” and I shook my head this time. “This won’t work again. I’m full,” I attempted to say, and he took the bite this time and cupped my cheek with his other hand.

"You know I am not the sweet husband type who would always obey you. I know how to force," He said, gently pushing the bite into my mouth. I hadn’t realized that I felt hurt by the word ‘Force.’ It brought back memories of my dead husband, and he immediately closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I am so sorry, Suman. I didn’t mean that. I am so sorry,” he said, wrapping his arm around me. I shook my head, smiling weakly, and rested my head on his shoulder.

"Just don’t say that again," I managed to say slowly, and he nodded.

"I’m sorry. I’ll keep that in mind," he said, and I looked.

"And don’t ever force yourself on me," I added slowly, and he shook his head.

"Never. I don’t need to force you; I can look into your eyes, and you’ll give in easily." His lips curved into a smile as I slapped his thighs, hiding my face in his neck for a moment. I began feeding him again, and I could feel just how hungry he was.

"You look so hungry," I said, and he nodded.

"Yes, the last time I ate was before I saw you. I didn’t get a chance to eat anything," he said, and I looked at him with suspicion.

"What do you mean?" I asked, and he immediately looked at me, shaking his head slightly.

“Uh, I mean… I don’t like eating anything anywhere except at home,”

I gritted my teeth a little. "Lies,"

He shook his head. “No, that’s the truth,” he tried to say, and I looked at him silently for a moment. He was hungry, and if he was hiding something, I needed to give him time to decide. I shouldn’t distract him from his dinner.

I nodded, convincing him that I believed him. “Okay,”

I continued feeding him, bite after bite, and felt his lips brushing against my finger all the time. It felt slightly uncomfortable the first few times, but this man had tasted something of mine. So, nothing could be more embarrassing than it.

He finished eating, and I got up from the couch to wash my hands. He also stood up to walk toward the bed. I lay on his chest and called to me. "Suman,"

I gulped nervously, watching him wait for me, and inhaled deeply. "Ji, my head is hurting," he said, and I bit my lips.

"You should sleep then, and I should go," I tried to say, and he immediately stood up from the bed and gave me a discreet look.

He strolled toward me with giant strides, and I blinked silently, watching him. His gaze softened slightly at the sight of me, and he muttered slowly, “I can do anything you want if it means you’ll stay with me.”

His slow, deep voice reminded me of the options he offered me the other day, one of which was the 'Tongue.' I lowered my gaze timidly and turned away from him, closing my eyes to calm myself.

"Umm, but you’re tired and should rest. Someone might find us, you know," I managed to say as I felt him moving closer behind me. My eyes widened when I sensed his hands touching the sides of my waist, slowly wrapping around my belly. His chest warmed my back, and I felt his face lean into the base of my neck.

His words made me feel weak in my knees.

“Do you want me to beg you to stay here for a night, dear wife?” The mention of ‘wife’ made me close my eyes and surrender in no time. Yes, I was his wife. No one could change that fact. And no matter how wrong it was for people, society, and the world, I was his wife.

And it did not feel wrong. Nothing at all. Still afraid.

“No,” I replied. I didn’t want him to beg me, now or ever. His command was sufficient, but his request felt like an order to me.

I closed my eyes, feeling his lips brush against my neck as he kissed my skin gently for a change. He pulled me closer and held my hand, guiding me toward his bed and hovering over me, prompting me to lean back in anticipation as he sat down on the bed and settled beneath me at the end.

I gulped nervously, and his next move brought me peace amid the chaos. He leaned in closer and kissed my forehead. “We’re just sleeping tonight, nothing more,”

A smile suddenly spread across my face, and he stepped aside, allowing me to feel at ease lying in his bed.

I saw him lying in bed next to me. My chest rose with each breath I took and fell with every exhale. My stomach felt fluttery. My fingers knit over my waist, stopping the trembling.

And I watched him silently shift onto one side, resting his head on his elbow for support as he looked into my eyes.

I knew we had shared some intense and heated moments, but this felt more captivating and exhilarating than those. Because when he thrust his dagger into me, my mind spun, and my body resonated with each thrust, creating its own melodies. And when he placed me in his lap and awarded me the very first act of pleasure in my life, I was too shocked to react. But this was entirely different. My mind was not dizzy; my body was not heated enough to have a mind of its own. There was peace, silence, and time to capture these moments for life.

The chamber was shrouded in darkness, illuminated only by a few fire torches in the corner and a lamp on the table by the couch that was burning softly. The curtains at the entrance of the bedroom and the windows were drawn tight. It was past midnight, and the chaos along with the distinct sounds of attendees walking, soldiers, and gossiping had quieted down completely.

The silence thickened the seasonally cold night air, making his normal breathing audible. From a distance, the voices of the

insects and crickets dripped into our ears.

I pulled my knees up, feeling a bit self-conscious about my waist being visible amid the dupatta tucked into the side of my skirt.

His gaze was intense as it held mine. The dark green ocean was pulling me deep into a surreal world where the chance of anyone intruding on our peaceful life was slim—very slim.

I gulped nervously as I noticed his gaze drop to my lips and linger there. The tightness in my heart intensified slowly as I waited for him to look away. However, the warmth of my cheeks transformed into heat—the heat from a lover's gaze, innocent yet sinful. Loving but dangerous.

My stomach tightened under his unbroken gaze, and a subtle nervous thrill coursed over my skin. My breathing was uneven as I noticed his gaze fixed on my lips. He continued staring until I bit the inside of my lower lip out of nervousness.

He inhaled deeply suddenly, his cheeks turning darker. He lifted his gaze to look at me, a cloud of questions visible in his eyes.

My heart sank to a new low, lost in his fresh darkness of green, mesmerized by his warm glow, soothing my body and soul from just inches away.

My gaze fluttered shyly as he moved a bit closer. His palm brushed my head with a gentle caress, and I gazed at his face, hovering above me.

The pause was agonizing. My toes curled in anticipation. His gaze fell to my lips again, and the rough yet gentle embrace of his palm on the top of my head felt like the most comforting thing I had ever experienced.

I gulped nervously and tried to speak. "Someday, someone will see us," my voice came out low, and he responded in his slow, deep voice.

"We aren't doing anything wrong," the word 'wrong' hung heavily on my breath.

"Hnn?" The words stuck in my throat. I was too stunned to speak, waiting for him to walk down the last few centimeters to lift me for the flight to my heavenly, pleasurable abode.

But his devilish grin fumigates impatience into me.

A slow chuckle followed, and I couldn't help but push him away, causing him to burst into laughter.

"Tell me you're thinking what I'm thinking," he laughed, and I closed my eyes, trying to catch my breath.

"No, I'm not thinking what you're thinking," I said, feeling his hand on my stomach. His fingers brushed my waist through the thin fabric before he looked at me. My cheeks flushed when he spoke. "You can tell me how you're feeling. I'm your husband,"

A timid smile appeared on my face at hearing the word 'husband' from him. "I will, if I feel anything," I said slowly, and he shifted closer again, resting his head on his elbow.

"So, how was your day?" he asked slowly, and I realized he had a habit of asking me this.

I intertwined my fingers with his and rested my hand on top of his. The feel of his skin sent a tingling sensation across my waist, and I nestled closer, burying my face in his neck. Nothing felt more comforting than his cologne after a long day at work. There was the home where I was born, then the home where I got married, and finally, the home where I tried to forget everything and move forward to live my life in peace. But this sanctuary of his arms felt more beautiful than heaven.

He was the devil who could kill for me. He was the lord who could protect me from any devil. I felt free with him. He never made me feel bad about myself. He was different from others. Even before our marriage, he never made me uncomfortable. I had never seen him flirting with anyone or making anyone around him feel uneasy.

"Hey," He muttered, and I felt his hand sliding along the curve of my waist, gradually pulling me closer. He pressed his back against the bed and lifted me slightly to lie on him. His hand wrapped around me as I rested my head on his chest.

It was hard yet comforting. He placed his hand on my head for a few moments to soothe my slight uneasiness.

I closed my eyes and felt him pulling the comforter up to cover us both. His hand began to caress my head, and I sensed my breathing calming down, moment by moment.

"Do you see your parents?" he asked slowly, and I opened my eyes, feeling a slight stiffness in my teeth at the mention of my 'parents.' I shook my head and sensed his hand gently working through my loose braid.

"Why not?" he asked in a slow voice. I lifted my gaze and pressed my chin against his chest, meeting his eyes.

"You know, when a girl is born, her parents view her as someone who belongs to someone else. They raise her with everything they have, teach her life's lessons, prepare her for her future, and keep reminding her that once she leaves her house for her husband's, the door to her home will close forever," I said, feeling his fingers gently touch the back of my head and his thumb caress my cheek near my ear.

"Hmm," he hummed as I inhaled deeply.

"They never cared about me after my marriage. It was their dream to send me off to my husband's home, and then they didn't even ask if I was dead or alive,"

His thumb gently caressing my cheek stopped me from crying.

"Then?" he asked, and I gulped.

"I couldn't escape him for the first three months. I was terrified. Death seemed preferable to me. You know, I was young

when I got married and…" I took a brief pause.

"You can tell me anything. I know everything," he muttered slowly and wrapped his other hand around me as well, sending an extra wave of comfort my way.

"I was always scared of menstruation," I chuckled softly. "I wouldn't even stand up, fearing that I might get blood stains on my clothes, and that would be embarrassing."

He smiled weakly as he listened to me. I felt his fingers at the end of my braid, gently brushing it.

"And after spending the first night with him, I realized that my fear was nothing compared to it. Since that day, I was afraid of the nights. I couldn't even watch the sun setting in the west. Day after day, the terror became my ultimate reality," I managed to say. My voice broke a little as I looked at his stiff face and noticed his fingers playing with my thoughts, unknowingly untangling the knots in my mind.

He stayed silent, and I sucked on my lips, unable to control myself.

"He hurt me beyond repair. After fucking me, he would not even ask if I needed a glass of water, or I wanted to... cuddle, or I needed a break. And if I tried to say that I needed a break, he would just start saying that it would only take a few moments," My breathing grew heavy as I recalled the painful memory, but he continued to caress my cheek and said nothing.

"You know, once I was cooking for his family. It was daytime, and I was alone in our small house when he returned from work. I was kneading the dough, my hands messy with flour, and I saw him walk in through the door. By then, I had become familiar with his expressions. The way he looked at me was telling. I tried to ignore him and started kneading the dough faster, wanting to escape and head towards the cow shed to feed them. But he stepped closer, removing his shirt. Tears stung my eyes, and a few drops fell into the flour," I paused, feeling breathless, and suddenly, he wrapped his arms around me and hugged me, holding me close to his chest.

"You don't have to say it," he muttered. I closed my eyes, and my voice trembled.

"He held my hand and… pushed me against the wall, lifting my skirt," I burst into tears. "Then, he bent me forward and took me from behind. My cheek was bruised against the wall. I… I went numb, and when he finished, I fell to my knees, half fainting,"

"Suman," he muttered, kissing my forehead. Tears fell from my eyes continuously as I spoke in my hoarse voice.

"But I had to finish kneading the dough, watch over the boiling milk, finish cooking the vegetables, and make chapatis for his family,"

My heart ached immensely, and I clenched my fist tightly on his chest.

"Why did you not meet me before?"

I broke into a flood of tears and lifted my eyes to look at him.

"I swear, if it had been you, I would have hugged the flames with a smile on my face,"

He cupped my cheek and shook his head, inhaling deeply. "Never, for me or anyone; life is never worth giving up," he muttered, kissing my forehead and cheek before hugging me tightly. My face nestled into his neck, and I felt more at ease in his arms.

The tears ceased as he gently caressed my back. My hair fell to one side, which he prevented from falling back further. "You undid my braid," I said with a slow chuckle and a tear, and he shook his head.

"Um, I'm really sorry, I was just combing your hair," his slow voice made me look at him, and I gulped silently. He smiled weakly at me and added, "I promise I will never ask you to do anything for me after we make love. You can rest," He chuckled, and I instantly erupted with soft laughter, playfully slapping his chest.

"That wasn't the moral of the story," I said, and he furrowed his brow. "It wasn't?"

I shook my head with laughter. "No, it was not. " My smile now hurt, so I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek against his chest. He silently brushed my hair, caressed my head, and spoke slowly.

"Suman,"

"Hn?" I asked, feeling his other hand caressing my jaw.

"Can I tell you something, and you won't judge me?" he asked as I opened my eyes to look at him.

"Never," I replied. He sucked on his lips slightly before I continued,

"Umm, I know we have choices in life, but we have shortcuts for everything." His words created thin lines on my forehead, evidence of my confusion.

"What do you mean?" I asked. He closed his eyes for a moment, shifted slightly, pushed me off his chest, and said, "Um, I can't tell you like that."

I sat up, listening to him, and looked at him as he turned his face away from me, put his feet on the floor, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You don't have to tell me about your life. It's not my place to know, and your comfort is paramount. If something is hurting you, you don't have to share it," I tried to say as I knelt silently behind him. He shook his head. His soft curls looked mesmerisingly beautiful that late at night as he said,

"I want to tell you. I mean, you know you can leave me after this, reject me. There's no foundation. I'm sure that man, or any

man, would be a thousand times better than me. Also, I'll keep an eye on him so he'll never hurt you, but you must know this is your choice. I know you've never been given an option before, but I want to offer you one. I want you to decide for yourself. You're not sixteen anymore. You're older, much more intelligent, and more mature than before. You know people now. All of this is... maybe a pull or attraction; I'm not sure yet. But I believe you deserve much more than this. I'm not the man you think I am, and I'm not. I'm not like my brothers, who saved themselves for their wives. I'm not an ideal husband. I prioritize the Kingdom above anyone else. I can kill without thinking twice, blood doesn't frighten me, fire doesn't scare me. I could die for our Kingdom without a second thought, Suman," he said. I felt a lump in my throat, unable to respond. My fingers felt slightly colder as I listened to him, and I didn't know what to say.

"I've done things that are unethical," he muttered slowly, and I lowered my gaze.

"I have done things a woman wouldn't want in her husband. That's why I am saying, I am saying that you can leave if you want. I mean, that man is great, and… he will keep you happy." His words stumbled, and his voice became hoarse. I couldn't help but shift closer to him and hug him from behind. My arms wrapped around his shoulders, and I pressed my head against his neck.

"I don't want to marry him. Don't I have any say in who I choose to marry or not if I have a choice?" I managed to say, and he touched my arm silently.

"Suman," he breathed, falling silent for a few moments.

"I was just fifteen," his voice broke slightly, the tremor evident. I shut my eyes. Nothing could touch me.

"Um, Rudra Bhaisa was twenty-two and practicing celibacy at that time, while Ranvijay Bhaisa was our Guruji's favorite student. He had appointed him as his assistant to teach other students as well. I always felt like a lost cause; I was intelligent but mostly distracted. Until then, I had been living with both of them, but Rudra Bhaisa then went to Suryagarh to work as the personal guard for the former King, who was our uncle, the elder brother of our father, while Ranvijay Bhaisa stayed with Guruji." He paused slightly, and I noticed him scratching his fingers.

"We were out of the money that our Maasi-maa earned for us, and at that time, I had just finished my fencing and war training. Like the basics, the advanced training provides actual war experience. Then, I began working as a soldier in one of the kingdoms. Since I was just fifteen, I was assigned to serve under the married princess of this kingdom. She was in her thirties—neither very young nor too old—and had two children; I didn't know them and never had the chance to. You know, while standing outside her chamber, I learned about the activities in the bedroom. However, they mainly involved fighting, yelling, and something else happening between them." He paused, and I opened my eyes and remained still, listening to him silently.

"You slept with that married princess?" I asked slowly, and he took a deep breath.

"Well, you made it easy for me," he said in a slow voice. I shifted a little to sit beside him, lowering my legs to the floor and holding his hand.

"Did she force you?" I tried to ask, and he furrowed his brows.

"I was not very mature to know what was forcing. But, she was attractive; she used to call me inside when she was changing, you know, like helping her to tie her blouse, and she used to do such things. The Prince was outside for some tour or visit, and they used to live alone in this small state like it was under some bigger Kingdom," He muttered, and I nodded.

"Oh, then?" I asked slowly, and he smiled slightly, listening to me.

"Then, one day, she asked me to strip naked for her, like as some prize. I felt bad, but she argued that I had seen most of her, so I should show myself. That day, she laid me under her, and it happened. She rode me. When it happened, a few times, I tried to ask why she was doing it. Her husband was good. She said something that I did not know. She said that she also loved her husband, but at a certain age, love fades away, and things come down to needs. The husband wants a wife to run the home, and the wife wants her husband to do the outside work. And she said that her husband cannot satisfy her," He muttered in a slow voice, and I smiled a little.

"Well, don't worry; I wouldn't want our first time to be like that, with me riding you,"

He burst into slow laughter. "That was not the moral of the story," he said, looking at me as I furrowed my brows.

"It was not?" I asked, and he shook his head. "No, it was not," I smiled as he held my hand.

"I'm afraid I wouldn't make a good husband. The girl I liked called me a manwhore, and you deserve better, Suman, seriously," he said, inhaling deeply as I looked at him.

I lowered my gaze to our intertwined hands and brought his hand closer to my cheeks. He gulped, looking at me, and I said, "With my experience, I know what a man's touch is, and I can bet your touch is something that doesn't exist in any other man. You might convince me to marry someone else, but I wouldn't be afraid of his touch; there's no guarantee of it. Don't worry; I don't want to stay with you if you don't want to," I tried to say, and he immediately pulled me closer, shaking his head.

"It's not like that," he shifted slightly, pulling his leg up, and I couldn't help but slide into his lap, spreading my legs apart. My breathing quickened.

"Then why do you want to push me away?" I tried to ask, and he replied, "Because you deserve someone better." I gulped and cupped his cheek, saying, "I just want to ask you one thing."

“Anything.”

"Will you leave me for any other woman?"

"Over my dead body,"

That was it.

“Then, I choose you in every situation,” I exclaimed, and he immediately wrapped his arms around me, flipping me down onto the bed with a swift motion.

My eyes widened with shock, and he brought his lips dangerously closer to mine in a mere moment.

“I’ve never kissed anyone. Do you want to take the lead?” he asked slowly, and I gulped nervously.

"Me?" I questioned, and he nodded.

I sucked on my lips and tried to ask. "Um, I think I have bad breath,"

He shook his head.

"It's okay. I have tasted something used to make a man obsessed with a woman, so bad breath would not affect it.” His words flushed my cheek, and I looked into his eyes. I brought my trembling fingers close to his cheek and looked at his lips. They were full and dark pink, and I gently brushed my thumb on them before lifting my face a little and pecking them momentarily.

I immediately looked into his eyes with confusion. Did he like it?

And he smiled a little.

“My turn,” he murmured, leaning in closer to press his lips against mine. Our noses touched, and I felt his hand wrap around my waist, bringing him closer to me. I sensed his lips parting as he drew mine into his mouth momentarily before lifting his face to meet my gaze again.

My mouth went dry. My heart raced, and my eyes widened with the sensations flowing through my body. The new itch in my core caused me to pull my knees up, and I rolled my cold toes with hesitation.

He gazed at me in silence, and I questioned whether he wanted more.

“My turn?” I asked, and he nodded briefly.

I sucked on my lips, tasting his saliva off, and cupped both of his cheeks again, firmer this time. And, pulling myself up, I placed my lips under his.

But before I could do anything, he pressed his lips against mine. My head fell deeper into the mattress as he opened his lips wide and sucked the breath out of me.

My body ached harder, and I felt the wetness of his mouth dirtying me with every moment. He caged me tightly, and when I tried to slip my lips out of his lips' range, he suddenly grabbed my skirt and pulled it over my thighs before plunging both of his legs between mine.

A slow and deep moan escaped my lips when my legs parted, adjusting his midriff between me. I turned immobile and breathless.

His lips were pressed against mine, leaving me with no chance to breathe. My eyes were shut tightly, and my head rolled back in search of an escape, but his movement was already adjusting before I could even expect it.

When my heart tightened and my breath became short, I pressed my feet into the mattress, lifting my torso against him in response.

He groaned. “I want to be inside you at this moment,” he breathed into my mouth, and I felt weak all of a sudden.

"Aannhhhhhhhhhh," A moan escaped my lips in response, and suddenly, he pressed his hardness against me, causing me to clench my hand on the bed.

“Kunwarsa,” I moaned slowly. The uneasiness of his length was brutal.

And, suddenly, he moved off, breaking the kiss, and sat up. "Oh my God!"

He covered his face, and I couldn’t believe what had just happened.

My breathing was labored, and I was panting audibly. I placed my hand on my chest to calm my breath, then sat up, pushing the skirt down to my feet.

He looked at me. “Are you okay?” His eyes expressed concern, and I nodded. “I’m sorry, I think I lost… my control,”

I swallowed hard and shook my head shyly. “You didn’t,” I managed to say, and he looked at me silently for a moment before lowering his gaze into a smile.

"Fuck! this is going intense. You want it too," He said, and I slowly shook my head while adjusting my dupatta, trying to conceal the smile that was dying to appear on my cheek.

“Umm, I should probably go,” I said as I attempted to get off the bed, but he stopped me. "Suman,"

I gulped silently, gazing at him, and he said, “Stay, please.”

"Stay, please,"

I requested in a soft voice, gazing at her deeply flushed face. Her skin had a unique radiance, reminiscent of the sun shining on icy mountains, like gold.

The lamp illuminated one side of her face. Her small, golden, simple *jhumkis* appeared utterly mesmerizing.

She averted her gaze and swallowed quietly, shaking her head. “What will I do staying here?” Her sweet voice made me feel the warmth on my cheeks. I didn’t know what was happening to me. It felt as if I were finally at peace.

Ever since I matured, I have constantly run away from one thing to another. But I wanted time to stop with her because I wanted to hear more from her.

“Maybe we could talk or sleep,” I managed to say, and she smiled a little while looking into my eyes.

“Yes, just like when we were sleeping before,” I bit my lower lip, trying to hide my smile as I shook my head. “Um, this time it’s real sleeping, I promise,” I said, and she nodded weakly. “Okay,” she replied, sitting on the bed beside me and looking at me with a slight smile. “What?” I asked, and she shook her head timidly.

I was blushing, too.

I didn’t know, but until she entered the room, I felt incredibly sleepy since I hadn’t slept for the past two days. The moment my eyes landed on her, it felt like I could sleep my whole life away, yet I knew this moment would never happen again.

"Lay back," she said. I looked at her, leaning closer to her, her fingers wrapping around my wrist. You look tense,” she added in a serious tone this time, pulling me slowly closer to her.

Her movements revealed a slight tremor as she cupped my cheek while lying beneath me. The light in her eyes sparkled with hope as she drew my face closer. I surrendered, closed my eyes, and positioned my elbows on either side of her chest, enveloping her.

Our foreheads touched, and I could hear her slightly quickened breathing. The shiver was palpable, and I ended up kissing her nose gently without making her feel comfortable.

She relaxed as I pressed my lips to her nose. The warmth of her face returned after a long pause.

I leaned in closer to the curve of her neck, hiding myself, and felt her fingers running through my hair. Our chests touched, and I pulled the comforter up to our shoulders.

“Your scent is cozy and alluring,” I found myself murmuring against her neck, and I heard her take a deep breath in response. This made me kiss her softly on the side of her neck.

“Does it feel good?” she muttered slowly, and I couldn’t help but smile lazily.

"It does,"

I felt her fingers tugging at the curls, stretching them out and leaving them to playfully bounce.

“You really have long hair,” her words made me smile.

“Really? Longer than yours?” I asked playfully, and she chuckled softly. I could feel her warmth against my chest.

“No, you wish,” she muttered.

She was soft. I couldn’t feel her bones. She wasn’t thin, but her waist was narrow. She had a small tummy. Her thighs were thick, which made her even more attractive when she walked.

“No, I do not wish,” I whispered against her skin, and she spoke in a slow voice.

“Suniye,” her words put a broad smile on my face, and I couldn’t hold back my happiness.

"Haayee,"

“Once again,” I spoke slowly, sensing her shyness in the silence.

She hesitated, ***“Suniye,"*** calling again, and I pressed my lips against her lower jaw. She pulled my hair a little, and I groaned with pain.

"Do not bruise me," she whispered and yelled at me, and I did nothing but press my lips even harder against the jaw, sucking her skin in.

She pulled my hair tighter this time and tried to move her neck away.

“Kunwar Agastya, Nandani will notice,” she muttered, biting her neck even harder, causing her to whimper in pain.

"Annnhhhh.” Her voice spun my thoughts in circles. The instant she whispered, “I hate you for this. You are a terrible husband.” I raised my gaze and met her eyes.

Her gaze flickered between my eyes and lips, and her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red.

“And what exactly do you want in a good husband?” I asked slowly as she lowered her gaze from my hair to my ear. Her attention shifted to my right ear, and I felt her index finger tracing its outline. She gulped silently and murmured softly.

“I just want you to be happy and healthy, always.” Her words brought a faint smile to my face as she gently pulled my face closer to hers.

Closing her eyes, she pressed her lips against mine. I could feel the soft tremble as she parted her lips and tried to suck mine. I gave in, closing my eyes, too. Tilting her face sidewards, she adjusted her lips and grabbed my lower lip between hers.

My mind went crazy, and I could not stop myself from sucking on her upper lips.

She sucked mine first, then I sucked hers. It was slow, and she repeated, followed by me. Our mouths tasted each other; I could feel the buried demands retaking birth as she sucked hungrier.

Gasping, she pushed me away. Timidity veiled her eyes, but desire consumed her thoughts. She kissed me after a lingering look at my lips.

I could not believe how hungry she was.

"This way, I will end up fucking you hard, Suman,"

I warned her, pausing briefly. My voice emerged as a slow whisper from my lips. Frustration layered over her as she muttered, shaking her head slowly while taking a deep breath.

"No, you would not,"

And she pressed her lips against mine again. But this time, she grasped my lower lip between her teeth, and my entire body shivered as she scraped her teeth against mine, drawing out the blood. I groaned into her mouth. My hand immediately moved to her and tightly gripped the nape of her neck.

She moaned in frustration as I noticed the blood on her lips. My breath quickened, and I pressed my thumb against her lips, resting my forehead there too. “You are dead; you are so fucking dead,”

Brushing the blood off her lips, I grabbed her neck. She rolled her eyes in response. One night with her, she had made me insane.

“What do you want, Suman?” I asked in a slow whisper as she bit my thumb.

"I do not know.” Her voice sounded the most seductive I had ever heard. I kissed her cheek, pressing my lips against her cheek. Then I made her look at me.

Her gaze was weak and submissive, yet it dominated me.

For a man, submission is the most dominating thing, but not everyone deserves it. And this woman could make me beg for her.

She looked in dire need right now. Her pleading eyes were evidence of it.

Her lips trembled, and I leaned in to kiss her forehead. I could understand her, but it wasn’t right yet. She wrapped her arms around me tighter, and I hugged her back just as firmly. Her breaths came in heavy, and I whispered slowly into her ear, “It’s okay, I understand.”

She kissed my cheek, and I slowly lowered my hand to her thighs. Pulling her skirt up, I moved my leg between her legs, pressing my thigh against her. She immediately responded by squeezing her thighs together, rubbing against me slightly.

I lifted my face a little to look into her eyes.

Her gaze was confused as I pressed my thigh lightly against her. Her mouth opened wide, her eyes following suit. A faint smile appeared on her lips, and I nodded slightly, encouraging her to rub against my thigh.

Her fingers tightened around my neck and the other gripped my bicep. She began to sway her hips slowly. Her eyes shut, and her head tilted back. Soft, deep moans flowed from her lips as she picked up her pace gradually.

I lay frozen, allowing her to take it from me, earning it herself.

"Annhhhh," Her moan deepened, bringing a proud smile to my face. Her orgasm heightened, and she dug her nails into my neck and pressed her other hand on the mattress, holding the bedsheet tighter in her fist.

Pressing her thighs tighter, she picked up a pace. Her breathing became wildly uneven, and I felt her heartbeats slowing to a stop. She moaned more intensely, her brows knitted tightly together. Her jawline looked edible, her mouth wide open, and she exploded.

"Annnhhhhh," Her heart raced with a loud pounding, her whole body visibly shivered, and she began to pant harder, biting her lips. A few more shudders subsided as she slowly came down from the height.

I shifted my thighs away from her legs and allowed her to draw closer to me. A shy smile formed on her face as she nestled into my chest.

I let them rest comfortably and held back from saying anything that might make her uneasy. I could tell she was confused as she let her body take control this time.

After a long pause of silence, she muttered against my chest. "It's wild,"

I smiled and kissed her forehead. "It's just a beginning, Sumanika ji,"

She chuckled when she heard me, and I moved off her and lay beside her, allowing her to rest peacefully. She rested her face on my chest and closed her eyes. "I am sleepy now,"

I muttered in response, “I’m glad.”

She gave my chest a light slap with her small hands, and I closed my eyes, gently rubbing her arm.

In her warm embrace, I fell asleep faster than I expected. It felt like I hadn’t slept this peacefully in a long time.

I woke up from a deep sleep with a vision of a river in my subconscious. It was still dark, and I found her sleeping with her face turned away from me.

Shifting slightly, I wrapped my arm around her and adjusted the comforter, pulling her closer. She inhaled deeply in her

sleep, and I gently kissed her shoulder before going back to sleep.

But before I could drown deep in the mind-numbing haze, she stretched her arms wide and turned her face toward me.

I also opened my eyes lazily and looked at her blinking sleepily.

Pressing my lips against her forehead, I pulled her closer, but she placed her hand on my chest, pushing me away. “Kunwarsa,” her voice said, making me open my eyes. I exhaled deeply, watching her sit up.

Her long, wavy-curly hair danced against my chest as I hummed. “Hmm?”

She remained silent for a moment as she gathered her hair and twisted it into a loose bun. Her shoulder muscles looked attractive, and I sat up to kiss her nape lazily.

“I should go now,” she murmured, turning back to me and kissing my cheek softly.

"Can you just stay here?" I asked sleepily, and she shook her head.

"No, I need to work now," she replied. I inhaled deeply in frustration and lay back on the bed.

"What work?" I asked slowly, and she looked at me, adjusting her Dupatta across her chest.

"Your bhabhisa will wake up soon, and I have to get ready before she—or anyone—wakes up," she explained, and I immediately pulled her closer.

Her eyes widened in shock, and I realized I didn't like her working for anyone anymore.

"What?" she asked, and I cupped her cheek, saying, "Give me just two months, and then you won’t have to leave my bed.”

Her face registered shock as she stumbled over her words.

"What? What are you going to do?" she asked, and I brushed my lips against hers.

"I’ll tell everyone how you bit my lips last night," I teased, and her face turned shy before she stepped down from the bed.

"No, I didn’t,” she protested.

A wide smile spread across my face.

"Oh, really! Are we playing that game right now? Half-wife?” I said, and she glared at me.

"Oh! What are you talking about? Did you dream about something? Half husband," she replied, and I grabbed her Dupatta. She sighed with slight frustration and took a step back, saying, "Keep it.”

I watched her walk away, grabbing the shawl from the couch and wrapping it around herself.

"Suman," I called slowly, and she turned back to look at me.

"Ji," she murmured.

"Now, the bruises count to three. Stay alert,"

"Now, the bruises count to three. Stay alert." The moment he said this, my hand instinctively went to my neck. My eyes widened in shock. "What?" I couldn't help but raise my voice, and he just chuckled, wrapping my Dupatta around himself and slipping back under the comforter.

"How could you do this?" I whispered beneath the layer of shouting.

He chuckled and replied slowly, covering himself with the comforter. "Good night, love."

I gritted my teeth even tighter. I couldn't believe it. Anger surged through my body as I marched toward him.

"You know, I can't even walk around like this, and my job involves meeting your Bhabhisa, Bhaisa, and other family members,"

He chuckled from beneath the comforter. "You bit my lips, too." Muffled, his voice made me grit my teeth as I yanked the comforter off him. It tousled his soft curls, and he looked at me.

"That was after you did this," I trembled, my voice pretending to be strong. "Now I'll have to hide from everyone. And it's all your fault."

He smiled at me and muttered, "You can hide under my comforter."

And that was it.

I couldn't help but close my mouth in defeat. He would never understand. "You know what? Forget it. You won't get this. Because you're a prince, and you can do whatever you want. You can sleep with anyone you want and let anyone bite your lips without a care. But I'm not a prince; I'm not even a man. I'm not privileged."

He inhaled deeply and sat up slightly. "So, we're doing this right now?" he murmured, raking his fingers through his hair.

I folded my arms and asked, "What do you mean by that?"

He bit his lips. "Ahh, it hurts," he complained slowly, then turned to me.

"You're acting like a mother, Suman," he said, and I took a deep breath out of frustration.

He gazed at me silently for a moment before saying, "Okay, we should do something about this." He got off the bed and walked closer to me, pulling me in and looking into my eyes. He was tall, and his veiny hand could wrap around a quarter of my arm whenever he held it.

"What?" I asked.

"Agastya,"

Suddenly, we heard Nandani's voice, and we exchanged confused glances. Fear coursed through my veins as he stepped toward me when the curtains in his bedroom opened. A strange silence followed, and I could feel my palms sweating with anxiety. If Nandani found out, we would be done for.

"Agastya," I heard Nandani let out a deep sigh, the sound of her anklet bells echoing in the bedroom as she came closer.

"Ji, Bhabhisa," his voice sounded frightened as she suddenly asked, "Who is behind you?" Her words sent a chilling shiver down my spine, as if I had been struck by a mountain. He let out a small laugh.

"No one, Bhabhisa, hahahaha," I heard her bangles clink as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"What? Hahaha! Who are you hiding from?" she asked, and he laughed again.

"Hahaha, it's early morning; you must be hallucinating. You know that darkness is the time for ghosts, and you s-,"

"Just step aside," she shouted at me, and I gasped when I saw Nandani standing before me, utterly stunned.

"Suman," her eyes widened in disbelief, and I could only cover my face with my palm and shake my head.

"No, I am not Suman. I am Bala... Rekha... Raveena..."

"What on earth are you doing here?" She placed her hand on her forehead.

"Agastya?"

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, his palm covering his mouth, and suddenly he said, "Ummm, nothing, she… ummm, she just… ummm, she just came to wake me up."

A sharp slap followed from Nandani to his bicep.

"Aaauuuchhhhhh!"

"In your shawl?" she yelled at him.

"Nandani," I tried to say, but her piercing gaze fixed on me.

"What? What the hell is happening between you two?" she shouted, and I shook my head in fear.

"Nothing."

"Do I look blind to you?" she demanded, locking eyes with me as he chimed in from behind, "Maybe."

She turned to him instantly.

"What? What the hell did you say?" she yelled as he ran his fingers through his hair and replied, "I don't know how you see Suman. No one is here. You're clearly hallucinating. Maybe this is your dream. Wake up, Bhabhisa, wake up." He said this as I lowered my gaze and shook my head

I couldn't believe it.

Nandani palmed her face in disbelief. "Seriously, Agastya? I gave birth a week ago, but I'm not mad. How can you even…?"

She gasped. "Wait a moment!"

She turned to look at me, then back at him.

“What’s on your lips?” she asked, and I quickly wrapped my shawl around myself. He bit his lip, and she glanced back at me.

"Suman, did you do that?" she asked, surprised, and I shook my head innocently.

"Why would I?" My voice trembled, and she inhaled deeply, walking toward the couch. She sat down and shook her head.

“I can’t believe this was happening right under my nose in this kingdom.”

He stepped forward and shook his head.

“No, Bhabhisa,” he paused before continuing, “Actually, our chambers are in a line, so it wasn’t happening right under your nose, but technically beside your nose,”

Nandani’s eyes blazed with rage as she hurled a couch pillow directly at his face. “Shut up!”

“What? I’m just correcting you!” he said, chuckling slightly.

“Leave him alone, Suman. Can you tell me what’s happening? What are you doing in his room so late at night?” she asked, and I lowered my gaze in shame.

I couldn’t help but say, “I’m sorry.” My voice broke as she quickly stood up from the couch and walked toward me.

"How dare you?" She raised her hand, but before she could touch me, he stepped in and muttered,

"Don't you dare, Bhabhisa." The anger in his voice was evident, though the pitch stayed low.

“Are you out of your mind, Agastya? This is cheating. You’re going to marry Rashmika in a few months. The friendship between Mehrangarh and Suryagarh relies on this alliance. And she was sleeping with you-“

“She was sleeping with her husband!” he interrupted, and I shut my eyes, allowing tears to flow down my cheeks.

“I’m really sorry,” I whispered softly.

“What?” Nandani asked in a slow, shocked voice. Her feet trembled slightly as he stepped forward.

“Be careful,” he said, holding her, but she shot him an intense, glare.

“What do you mean she was sleeping with her husband? What the hell is happening here? And what are you two up to?” she asked, and I broke down in tears.

"I'm sorry, Nanda-,"

“You heard that right, Bhabhisa. She was sleeping with her husband, who is me. We were just cuddling, and yes, of course, a few kisses—nothing more,” he said, and she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes. He wasn’t helping her.

“I’m not asking for details, Agastya,” she gritted her teeth in anger.

“Suman, what’s happening here?” she asked, turning her gaze toward me. Her eyes filled with tears as she spoke. “Did he force you to do something? Are you opposed to it? Did he ask for your consent?” Her voice broke, and I knelt before her, nodding.

“Yes, I know what I was doing,” I managed to reply.

She sighed deeply and palmed her face. "My brother-in-law and my sister are like best friends? Seriously? Do you two not care about what people will say? The cast is different, and the statuses are worlds apart. Our kingdom would be nothing but a joke. This is what your father did, Agastya, and this is what you are doing. You are using her," she said, looking at him while holding my hand.

His face flushed upon hearing this, and he lowered his gaze.

"No, he is not using me, Nandani. Stop hurting him," I couldn't help but say.

She turned her shocked gaze to me, and I let fresh tears fall from my eyes.

"I didn’t tell you something," I said, turning my gaze to look at him. He nodded silently, and I looked back at her.

My voice broke as I began, "When my husband died, the old one..."

"Yes, I know, I was pregnant," she replied.

I nodded. "Yes, the people my tribe captured wanted to burn me along with him," I managed to say, my voice trembling.

"What? Why didn’t you tell me anything?" She asked, shock and worry on her face.

"Because you were pregnant," I managed to say.

"Then?" She held my hand.

"Then he came to save me, but the people were too stubborn; they didn’t want to let me go until he had to marry me," I said, and her eyes widened in shock.

"Marry as in, in the temple, the whole ceremony?" she asked, and I shook my head.

"No, he..." my voice broke. "He cut his thumb with his sword and filled the partition of my hair with his blood," I tried to explain, and she screamed.

"What??"

Then she lifted her gaze to look at him.

"What the hell? Why didn’t you tell me or anyone anything?" she yelled at him, and he inhaled sharply.

"Well, I expected a thank you so much, Devarsa, for saving my best friend," he teased her lightly, and she gritted her teeth.

"I am not in the mood, Agastya," she said, clenching her fists.

"Well, we can't tell anyone anything until I get rid of Rashmika," he said, and she narrowed her brows.

"So, you're making it real?" she asked slowly.

There was a slight pause. I didn't say anything, and he nodded slowly.

"I didn't want to, but now, yes, I want her," he said, looking into my eyes.

Goosebumps spread across my skin as he said that while she looked at me.

"I can't believe those people tried to kill you. I'm going to wage war on them. How could they?" she raged, and I shook my head.

"They wouldn't listen, Nandani. It's the custom of our tribe, and it's like singing in front of a cow," I managed to say, and she immediately hugged me tightly.

"Oh my God! I can't even imagine what would have happened to you," her voice broke, and I hugged her back.

"Nothing happened to me," I said, my voice trembling.

"Still not a thank you," he muttered from behind, and I couldn't help but chuckle a little.

She withdrew from the hug and stood up from the couch, walking toward him.

"What happens to Rashmika now?" she asked seriously, and he lowered his gaze for a moment.

"Give me some time; I will show you," he said slowly, and I noticed he seemed very tense about something. Last night had been quite playful, but he still seemed a little off. I couldn't figure out what was wrong with him.

"By the way, thank you so much for saving her," she said, and he smiled.

"You gave me a nice gift; this was the least I could do," he muttered softly, and I narrowed my brows, unsure whether I should smile or be upset.

"Why did you come here early in the morning?" he asked suddenly, and she lightly slapped her forehead.

"Yes, I came here to ask you to go with Abhinandan. He actually needs a hand with something," she said, and he nodded.

"Alright," he agreed and then looked at me.

"Ummm, I should also leave," I managed to say, and she shook her head.

"That's okay, I should probably leave... You two can continue whatever you're doing," she said, walking away, but suddenly Kunwarsa stopped her.

"Bhabhisa,"

She turned to look at him.

"Don't tell Bhaisa anything," he said, and she narrowed her brows.

"What will I get in return?" she asked, making an upset face.

"Fine, I will obey whatever you say for the next year," he said, and she narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

"This matter is too big for one year. You will owe me for the next five years," she challenged, and he inhaled deeply, frustrated.

"See, Suman, what's the real character of your best friend," he said, looking at me, and I couldn't help but lower my gaze shyly.

"Fine, you win," he stated, and she smiled.

"Also, Suman, just don't get pregnant before it becomes official, you know," she said, and I immediately shook my head.

He chuckled. "Oh, you're late, Bhabhisa; she already is,"

Her eyes widened in shock.

"No, no, no, Nandani, he is joking; I'm not. We haven't done anything," I tried to clarify, and she inhaled deeply.

"Your neck says otherwise," she said, and he chuckled.

"Ahh, that's my art," he replied, pride dripping from his words.

I couldn't help but look his way.

But Nandani interrupted, "But her art is better than yours."

"But her art is better than yours," Bhabhisa said, and I couldn't help but chuckle as I watched her leave us alone with a slight smile. When she disappeared, I exhaled deeply and looked at Suman, wiping the fresh tears from her cheeks.

"Hey," I muttered, stepping closer to her.

She broke into a few more cries, and I couldn't help but wrap my arms around her and caress her back.

"Bhala itni si par bhi koi rota hai," "Does anyone cry over such small things?"

She hugged me back tightly.

"I'm sorry. It's all because of me," she muttered, and I closed my eyes, kissing her head.

"No, nothing is because of you. Why are you even crying? This was meant to happen someday," I tried to say, but she shook her head.

"But she got angry because of me," she sobbed, and I continued to caress her back.

"She wasn't angry," I said, pausing just long enough to find the right words. "She was experiencing postpartum mood swings. She just had a baby. It's normal," I explained, and she chuckled, pushing me away.

"Do I look like a fool to you?" she asked with a pout, and I shook my head.

"No, you look like my wife to me," I couldn't help but say.

"No one is going to agree with us. She agreed because I'm her best friend. Ranaji, Prince Ranvijay, and the other kingdoms won't like it," she said with slow tears. I cupped her cheek to make her look at me.

"Agastya Dev Singh kahenge to bhagwan ko bhi manna padega, ye to fir bhi chote mote Raja hi hai," "If Agastya Dev Singh asks them, even God will have to agree, let alone these minor kings."

She laughed a little, and I wiped the tears from her cheek.

"But I hurt her," she said, and I pulled her into a warm hug again.

"That's okay; I'll gladly be her dog in return," I said, remembering what Bhabhisa had asked me to do as part of our arrangement this time.

"What would she ask you to do?" she asked, breaking the hug. I looked into her morning eyes—empty yet filled with love.

"Nothing," I paused, "Just stirring up a bit of drama between her and Bhaisa so their relationship continues to blossom, and finding some useful information for her—things she likes but doesn't share with Bhaisa," I said.

"What things?"

I furrowed my brows and asked, "Umm, that's a secret between us?"

And she nodded. "Of course."

"Mitti khati hai tumhari Priya sakhi," "She eats edible clay," I said, and her eyes widened in shock.

"What? She didn't give that up?" she asked.

I furrowed my brows. "Does she look like someone who gives up on anything? Just think about how she managed to win over my Bhaisa."

She raised her own brows. "You don't feel ashamed saying those words in front of her? I mean, doesn't she feel like a mother figure to you?"

I gently took her hand and guided her to the edge of the bed. I sat down and pulled her closer, settling her in my lap.

"I do, but she doesn't see me as a child," I said, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. I didn't know why, but I lost my composure whenever she cried. The moment Bhabhisa tried to raise her hand to her, I lost it. I understood they were best friends, and her family treated Suman as one of their own. Daadisa cared for her, called Abhinandan Bhaisa, and Bhaisa respected her immensely, but I couldn't tolerate anyone raising their voice at her.

Because she didn't deserve it. I had always found her waking up before everyone else and being there for Bhabhisa whenever she needed her. And she never made it seem like a burden. She had forgotten herself for this family—my family.

She watched me silently and muttered, "I'm sorry for all the blunders."

I shook my head and cupped her cheek. "You are the most beautiful blunder any man could ever have, Suman," I said, stroking her cheek, and she leaned in closer, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

Hiding her face in my neck, she kissed the base of my neck and whispered, "Thank you for everything, Kunwarsa."

Her words sounded sad, and I wrapped my arms around her tightly, closing my eyes. "I don't need a 'thank you.'"

Her hold tightened on my shoulders. "But," I paused and couldn't stop myself from smiling.

"If you want to thank me, you know... the bet is still pending," I concluded, and she immediately lifted her gaze to meet mine with an intense glare.

"I can't believe you," her voice was astonished. She immediately pushed me to stand up.

But I held her wrist to stop her. "Hey, you can't leave without a proper thank you. I'm a man of my word. If I say something, I stick to it," I said with a smile. Her frustration flared up as she shook her head.

"Are you mad? I've done nothing like that," she said with a flushed face, and I pulled her closer.

Our chests collided, and I gently cupped her cheek, gazing into her eyes. Her gaze flickered between mine and my lips as her

heartbeat quickened.

“Do you want to see how it’s done?” I asked. She inhaled sharply, her cheeks flushed. She shook her head slightly, as if trying to resist the effort.

A smile spread across my face as I asked, “Do you want to go out with me?”

Her eyes widened slightly, and she asked, “Where? Why?”

I sucked on my lips. “To the rivers, the mountains, the markets,” I paused. “To the place where you can see how to do it,” I finally said slowly, and she gulped nervously. Her lips trembled.

“You,” her voice broke. “You want me to see another man naked?” she asked slowly, and I muttered, “Trust me, I wouldn’t mind unless it affects your comfort and happiness.”

She pulled her lips between her teeth and nibbled slightly. “What should I say? Where am I heading? To everyone,” she inquired slowly, and I replied quietly.

"You do not have to worry about that. I will tell Bhabhisa,"

Her cheeks flushed, and she asked. "Tonight?"

A smile appeared on my face, watching her excitement, and I nodded. "Yes,"

She smiled a little and suddenly.

“Kunwarsa,” an attendee walked in. She turned to look at the entrance and recognized that it was the same attendee who had watched us twice. She fumbled and tried to stand up.

“Yes,” I said to the attendee while holding her firmly in my arms. She kept struggling as I noticed the shock in her widening eyes, and she spoke to me. "Umm, Ranisa is asking for you,"

"Hum bhi to yahi batane aaye the," “I came to tell him just that,” Suman said, attempting to break free from my hold, and I glanced at her.

"Tum kal raatri se yahi bata rahi ho hume?" “You are telling me that only from last night?” I asked, and her eyes widened with surprise shock.

“I’m coming,” I told the attendee as I watched her leave.

“How can you do that?” she asked in shock, and I leaned in to kiss her cheek.

"Bass bhaisa ko pata chalne do, fir to hum tumhe baandh ke rakhenge," “Just wait until Bhaisa finds out; then I’ll tie you to me,”

She bit on her lips, and I could not help but lean in closer to her neck. She struggled a little. "Kunwarsa," but gave in slowly when my lips wrapped around her neck, sucking her flesh in gently.

A soft moan escaped her lips as she pleaded, “No more bruising, please.”

I couldn’t stop myself. “It’ll take more than a request to stop me, love,”

She winced in mild pain and withdrew her face. Her anguished eyes locked onto mine, and she lightly slapped my cheek.

"Bilkul baat nahi maante aap," “You don’t listen to me at all,” frustration dripped from her tongue as I looked at her expressionlessly. I loosened my grip and lowered my gaze in silence.

“Kunwarsa, I’m sorry, I truly didn’t mean to,” she said, gazing at my face. She cupped my cheek and made me look at her.

“Alright, go ahead and bruise me as much as you want,” she said in a low, tense voice, brushing her hair aside.

“No, I don’t want it now,” I pouted as she cupped my cheek.

“Oh, please,” she muttered, and I couldn’t help but smile as I looked at her.

"Suhaagraat ka samay aane do, tumhari deh ka ek bhi Kona nahi chodenge hum," “Just wait for the consummation night; I won’t leave a single part of your body untouched,” I said, and she looked at me in surprise.

“You’re joking, right?” she asked slowly, while I muttered, cupping the back of her neck.

“Only fools take my words as a joke. The wise understand the wrath behind them,” I muttered, pulling her closer to me.

Her lips trembled slightly, and I pressed my lips against hers. She inhaled deeply as I brushed my lips over her soft, pink petals; I closed my eyes and drew their essence in.

She shivered in my embrace as I tilted my face to the side and began kissing her lips. She was soft, and when the heat between us intensified, she pushed me away and stood up.

“I have to go,” she inhaled deeply and quickly stepped away from me.

A smile crept onto my face as I watched her hide her blush and smile while walking away from me.

I gulped silently and stood up from the bed to take a quick bath.

After taking a bath, I walked out to meet King Abhinandan in his guest chamber.

“Pranam, Abhinandan,” I muttered as I entered the meeting area of his guest chamber and found him savoring breakfast with his twin sons, enjoying the fruits.

“Pranam, Kunwar Agastya,” he said, stepping forward to give me a loose hug.

“Where have you been? I couldn’t find you during the entire ceremony,” he said. I smiled weakly and replied as I took a seat on the couch.

“Um, I had been watching a few activities,” I said as I looked at him, picking up one of his crying sons.

“Ohhh, my baby,” he muttered, patting his chest, and I inhaled sharply, realizing that my Bhabhisa was his sister. That meant my niece was in a relationship with this crying child. They shared the same genes, which meant that when she got a little older, she would cry like him.

"Oh God!"

“What happened?” Abhinandan asked, and I couldn’t believe I had said that out loud.

"Ahh, nothing, he is cute and lovely and beautiful, I mean children!"

Wait! I’d also have children one day.

I exhaled deeply, trying to focus on one thing at a time.

Girls are definitely better than boys. My niece was better than those twins.

"So, where have you been?" he asked again, and I smiled.

"Um, you were right to doubt," I couldn’t help but declare.

His eyes widened. "What? Is that true?" he asked in shock, while the child cried even more intensely.

"Aaauuuuuuujajauaaaaammmmmaaaa,"

"Awwwllleeeeeooooohhhhhhuuuuuuuuu," Abhinandan sang him a lullaby in his language, and I swallowed hard in silence.

"Then?" He asked.

"Um, I went to see that, and yes, it was there. I do not know what to call them," I said. The other child also started crying.

"Aaaaaaaaammmmmuuuuuupppaaaaa,"

He exhaled in frustration. "Trisha," he called, then called louder. "Trisha, they are crying." I saw his wife running to him, and I stood up.

"Pranam, Ranisa," I bowed slightly, and she nodded.

"Ji, pranam," she replied.

"Take them away for a bit," he muttered slowly, and I didn’t catch her response, but it sounded like, "Want more babies?" I struggled to suppress my laughter and glanced at Abhinandan's face, which flushed a bit as she took the babies away with the attendant.

"So, yes, where were we?" he said, scratching his brow and muttering, "Canons; these are called canons. My cousin in the Sultanate of Darmiyan, Kainat, and one more—I forget the name—owns them; I think it's Hamid Sultanate."

He continued, and I furrowed my brow in confusion.

"So, is there a chance they could be the same people?" I asked, and he shook his head, confused.

"No, but the area they cover is vast, and they own the northern Arab region without any clue about what’s in the south. It could be them, or it might be someone else, or it could be someone we’ve never heard of," he replied, and I bit my lip.

"Well, we can surely find out, but for that, Mehrangarh needs to open his mouth wide," I said, and he nodded.

"And we can’t just wage war based solely on what we know about Mehrangarh; we don’t know how many kingdoms have already been sold. These people look sharp; they're not coming through the door directly; they’re brainwashing our people against us. We can stop Mehrangarh, but what if they have another kingdom as backup?" he said, and my head started to ache.

It was too much for one day.

"I’m getting it," I managed to say.

"I think we should alert the other kings, too," Abhinandan said, and I looked up at him, joggling my head.

"You just said we don’t know which kings are already compromised, and now you want to tell them about it? Don’t you think spreading the word will draw Mehrangarh's attention? I’m not informing my Bhabhisa yet because we need a plan for execution that doesn’t put any lives at risk," I said, and he inhaled deeply, intertwining his fingers in his lap.

"Lives are already at risk whether they know or not, Kunwar Agastya. “ His words made me lower my gaze. I said, "I know," before adding, "By the way, when are you leaving?"

He furrowed his brows a little. "Today," he said, and I pressed my lips together.

"Let me set up a quick meeting between us. At least Pratapgarh, Mahabaleshgarh, and Suryagarh should stay ahead in the plan," I proposed, and he nodded in agreement.

"Yes," he muttered.

I rose from my seat. "Alright, I’ll send someone to bring you to the meeting hall, King Abhinandan," I said, joining my hands. He stood up as well.

"Ji," he muttered with a weak smile.

From there, I walked to Ranvijay Bhaisa's chamber.

"Agastya," Bhaisa said, noticing me in the meeting area. "What happened? Everything okay?" He asked, taking the seat beside me and placing his arm around my shoulders.

"Yes, everything’s fine," I tried to assure him as I looked at Aishwarya Bhabhisa approaching us.

"Pranam, Bhabhisa," I said with a smile, and she joined her hands, placing the breakfast plate on the table before sitting on the couch across from us.

"Pranam, Devarsa, how are you? Where did you go after the ceremony?" she asked, furrowing her brows with a smile, and I

chuckled.

"Nowhere, you know me," I replied, and she laughed.

"Of course, of course, but you know your fiancé was here; you should have been with him," she said, and I smiled, trying to blush a little.

"Ji, Bhabhisa," I said, unable to come up with anything else to say.

Suddenly, I felt Bhaisa's hand on my shoulder, and I looked at him.

He smiled suddenly, looking at me, and said, "Aishwarya, I think I left my books open; would you check?"

"Ji, Hukum," Bhabhisa smiled and walked away.

"What's going on?" he asked, looking at me, and I said, "It's getting serious."

He gulped, understanding what I meant. "How serious?" he asked, already knowing where I had been lately.

"Very serious. They have cannons, and they're planning to use them against us. Abhinandan mentioned that more kingdoms could be involved in this too," I explained, and he inhaled deeply.

"Maybe," I nodded, listening to him, and he asked, "What's a cannon?"

I inhaled sharply and briefly explained everything I had seen, causing him to lower his gaze for a moment.

"I believe it's time to take this matter to Bhaisa," he said, and I nodded.

"Yes, it's time."

We both stood up and walked towards Bhaisa's chamber. My gaze fell on Suman with the baby, strolling her in the sunlight, and I noticed her looking at me. She quickly turned her gaze away as I walked closer to Bhaisa.

"Is Rahu and Ketu together today?" he asked as he took a seat on the couch.

"Suman, where's my princess?" he said, looking at Suman as she walked closer and handed him the sleeping baby in his arms. He sat in the sunlight, and we both took a seat across from him on the couch.

"Pranam, Bhaisa," I said, looking at him as I freed the princess's small hands from the fabric, allowing her to move a little more freely.

I smiled as he caressed her cheek to wake her up.

"Rudraja, my princess, look who's here to meet you? Both your Kakusa's," he said, and she yawned, opened her big eyes, and smiled at him.

"Aaaaaannn," her sweet voice filled my ears, and I didn't know it then, but seeing her, I felt she didn't deserve this. She shouldn't have to lose any of her family to these senseless wars, nor should any child.

She began playing with Bhaisa's neckpiece, and he turned his attention to us.

"So, what brings you here this morning?" he asked, and I inhaled sharply.

"Bhaisa, we need to tell you something," I said, and he furrowed his brows.

"Is Mehrangarh planning against us?" he asked, and my eyes widened in shock.

"How do you know?" I questioned, and he chuckled slightly.

"So you think I'm too busy to know where, what, and how my brothers are doing?" he replied, and I bit my lip.

"But it's more dangerous than we think," I asserted, and he nodded.

"Tell me everything," he urged, playing with the princess's little fingers as she yawned, feeling sleepy again.

"Bhaisa, they have something called cannons, and we won't be able to fight them with just soldiers," I said, and suddenly our attention was drawn to Abhinandan.

"Rudra," he called, and we looked at him as he walked towards us and sat beside Bhaisa.

"Come, Abhi, we have something to discuss," Rudra Bhaisa said, and he smiled, looking at the princess.

"Aw, our little niece is enjoying her sunbath," he said, touching her fingers before looking back at Rudra Bhaisa.

"Well, I'm somewhat aware of it," he said, and he nodded.

"So what do you suggest, Agastya?" he asked, turning his tone a little serious, and I inhaled deeply.

"I think we should prevent them from coming this way across the mountains in the first place. No contacts, no war, no problem," I said, and Ranvijay Bhaisa added.

"I agree with that. Why don't we stop them from invading in the first place so their powers weaken before they enter?" he said, and Abhinandan asked.

"How will we do that exactly?" he inquired. I inhaled sharply.

"The first state that comes near the mountains is Mehrangarh, which is already compromised as they are helping them out. The first kingdom they would come across is Pratapgarh, and we cannot overlook the fact that Pratapgarh is currently under the watch of a Subedaar, not a King. It would be easy for them to take that, and it could become a weak point for us. Because if one falls, two wouldn't be much of an effort. We cannot let them win even one," I said and paused for a moment.

"We should keep an army on standby in Pratapgarh. Even if our plan fails, that would be the first point of contact for the fight. Plus, no women and children stay in Pratapgarh, so it will be a safer option to lead a fight from there," I added, and Rudra Bhaisa agreed.

"But, Agastya, moving heavy troops could alert Mehrangarh. Plus, Princess Rashmika and their army chief are in Suryagarh

now," he cautioned.

Suddenly, Abhinandan interrupted. "Well, that's a good thing. We can keep them busy, and at least Mahabaleshgarh should start moving the troops. Also, no one would suspect anything because both kingdoms are under my rule, and I could easily say that I am rebuilding that empire," he concluded, and Ranvijay Bhaisa nodded.

"Exactly, and we should not move our soldiers because they clearly have cannons, and we cannot place all our army in front of them in plain sight. The more we attack in small intervals, the better. They will get tired, and this way, we can see how much gunpowder they have left to blast," he said, and I immediately interrupted.

"They have a lot, Bhaisa. A lot means a lot. Mehrangarh has been buying yellow sand from Songarh for the last four years and has taken a majority for that. Mehrangarh is rich in other minerals too. Moreover, they have more than a hundred cannons in their possession, so you can guess how much they have," I informed him, and Rudra Bhaisa inhaled deeply.

Suddenly, my attention fell on Suman bringing breakfast to the table, and I realized I had lost my mind before; I had lost my sanity right at that moment.

"Ranaji, breakfast, shall I serve?" she asked, and I inhaled deeply, trying to clench my fingers tightly.

"Suman," our attention was caught by Bhabhisa walking in, and she turned to look at her.

"Leave it; Reva will do it. You come with me," she instructed, and Bhabhisa glanced at me for a moment. A hint of apology appeared on her face, and I watched Suman silently walk away.

"That's okay, Bhabhisa, I will serve," I said, watching her leave with Suman.

"So, we should plan something to stop them before they enter," Abhinandan suggested, and suddenly something struck my mind.

"Bhaisa, let me lead," I said, looking at Rudra Bhaisa. He stared at me for a moment and nodded.

"Since you figured this out, you lead," he replied, and I stood up from the couch.

"Then Mahabaleshgarh will keep the army on standby, and I will be the head commander," I declared, and they all stood up too.

"Alright, then, let us know more; I will lead the army of Suryagarh," Rudra Bhaisa said, smiling at his Princess and Ranvijay Bhaisa.

"I will try to contact the other princely states and ask the people to shift to the outskirts of the Kingdom for their safety," I nodded.

"Alright, I will see you later then," I said, leaving them to walk into Bhabhisa's chamber.

The moment I entered, I saw Suman and Bhabhisa talking.

"Agastya," Bhabhisa noticed me and turned to look at me.

I ran my fingers through my hair and said, "Suman, we need to talk," trying to keep my voice down, but she frowned slightly.

"Yes," she replied, and I glanced at Bhabhisa watching me.

"In my chamber," I added, and she gulped nervously.

"Agastya, be calm," Bhabhisa advised, and I nodded.

"I am calm, Bhabhisa," I assured her, and she nodded back.

"Okay, I am coming," she said.

"I will be waiting," I replied, looking at Bhabhisa.

"Also, she is going out with me," I added, and Suman's eyes widened a bit.

"Umm, actually, just to roam around a little," she explained, and Bhabhisa smiled.

"That's fine, I don’t need to know. You deserve a life, and if he is giving it to you, I could not be happier," she said, patting her hand.

"You should go now," she instructed, looking at me.

"Agastya, we need to talk," Bhabhisa said, and I nodded while watching her, leaving me alone with her. I walked towards her and sat down beside her on the couch.

She smiled weakly and said, "It's in her blood, Agastya. It will take her time to understand the line between a Prince's wife and a royal servant."

I nodded and inhaled deeply. "I do not want her to do anything. Not anyone's and not even yours," I said, looking into her eyes, and she smiled back.

"I know. I will talk to her," she assured.

"No, I will talk to her; it's our responsibility to understand this," I insisted.

She nodded. "It couldn't be better than this," she said, inhaling deeply before continuing.

"Agastya, she had a difficult past. I’m not sure how much you know, but as a woman, I can tell she has experienced the worst. And no matter how much time has passed, it still affects her. Be humble, kind, and understanding towards her. Just don’t do anything that might awaken her past. It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen her smile effortlessly. And protect that smile, because while it's easy for a child to smile, it's hard for a wounded soul to do so," she said, and I nodded.

"I understand, Bhabhisa, don’t worry; I know what I’m doing," I replied with a smile.

"Also, thank you for what you did outside," I said, and she smiled.

"You're my brother-in-law. That was the least I could do," she replied as I stood up from the couch.

"I should head out now."

Suddenly, Bhaisa walked in with the Princess. He said, "Agastya, you still don't want to hold your niece?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "I'm not ready yet, Bhaisa. She's so fragile," I said, moving toward him and admiring the beautiful sleeping charm in his arms.

"By the way, what happened to your lips?" he asked, and suddenly, Bhabhisa chuckled. ***"Aa jao Rudra me karke batati hu kya hua hai,"*** "Come in, Rudra, I will show the practical,"

My eyes widened with shock, and Bhaisa's brows thinned.

"Do not you dare to get Rashmika pregnant before the wedding. I will kill you," he said, and I shook my head.

"Not even in my dreams, Bhaisa," I managed to say, but Bhabhisa interrupted.

"Rudra, your warning should be, 'Don't you dare get any woman pregnant before the wedding,'" I immediately turned to look at her.

"Bhabhisa!" I glared at her, and she raised her hands. "Fine, I'll be quiet now," she said, and I turned to Bhaisa. "Okay, Bhaisa, I'm leaving," I said as I headed toward my chamber.

Suman

As I entered his room, my gaze fell on the unmade bedsheet, prompting an urge to tidy it up. After checking the entrance and seeing he hadn't appeared, I walked over, pulled off the sheet, shook it out, and spread it over the bed, neatly tucking in the sides. Hearing his approaching footsteps, I quickly arranged the pillows on the headboard.

"Suman," he called in his slow, deep voice. I looked at him as he walked toward me. "What happened?" I asked softly, trying to keep my racing heartbeat under control. I noticed his intense gaze and the neatly made bedsheet.

"You did this?" he asked slowly. I nodded, unable to understand the emotions behind his voice. "Yes." He furrowed his brow and crossed his arms over his chest. "Why?"

His question made me frown in confusion. "Why not?" I replied. He bit his lower lip and walked past me to sit on the edge of the bed. "Suman, there are so many people who can do this."

His words made me inhale sharply. "Of course, there are. I don't have a problem with your intense interrogation."

I tried to explain, but he inhaled sharply. "Suman, there are better uses for you than serving food, making beds, and cooking."

I gulped and nodded slightly. "So, are you implying that all homemakers—like women, wives, and mothers who support their families—have no value?"

I asked, and he shook his head. "No, but you shouldn't be doing what others can do."

I inhaled sharply, crossed my arms over my chest, and asked, "And might I ask why?" Then I sat beside him on the bed.

"Because I don't want you to. You are my... wife," he said slowly, causing me to lower my gaze for a moment and inhale deeply.

"Still, I will cook, make the bed, and do everything else a woman should do," I said, looking into his eyes.

"But why? Bhabhisa doesn't do anything. Aishwarya Bhabhisa focuses on her business, and now Bhabhisa understands that you don't have to do anything," he said, and I shook my head.

"You know, they were raised differently, just like I was. Plus, even if they don't do anything, that doesn't mean they can't. They simply don't have the time. Given the chance, they'd love to do things for their husbands and families," I tried to explain.

"Yes, because they are their families," he replied.

"And not mine?" I asked. He stared at me for a moment and said, "I don't mean to imply that. You're steering this conversation in a completely different direction."

I wetted my lower lip with my tongue and asked, "Okay, what do you want to say?" I spoke slowly. He touched my arm and took my hand in his.

"I don't want you to feel scared all the time. You shouldn't be constantly worried about what you have to do. Just do whatever you want; don't overwork yourself. You're already doing a lot," he said, and I sat in silence for a moment, gulping.

"Kunwarsa, you're saying this only because we have this connection. You wouldn't have noticed me at all if that incident hadn't happened. This shift in feelings is only because we are bound to each other now," I said, inhaling deeply. He shook his head.

"It's not like that, Suman. Yes, it's because we are connected. If I say I don't want you to work, it means I don't want you to work, end of discussion," he stated, looking at me. My mouth dropped in shock and anger.

"You can't tell me that I can't work. That's not your place," I asserted, and he shook his head.

"I said, end of the discussion, Suman," he replied, and I stood up from the bed as he gritted his teeth.

"I'm not done talking," he stated, and I shook my head.

"But I'm done talking. You can go wherever you want; do I say anything? No. You can flirt with Princess Rashmika right in front of me. Do I say anything? No. You can call me in the middle of the night if you want to; do I say anything? No. You watch me change without me knowing; do I say anything? No," I said, and he stared at me silently for a moment.

"And you do not even listen to me," I said, fisting my fingers, and he lowered his gaze.

"Alright, I'm sorry. Just do what you want; go ahead," he said, and I furrowed my brows.

I attempted to speak, but no words came out. He rose from the bed, yanked the bedsheet off, handed it to me, and said slowly, "This is dirty." He walked away from there into the other part of the chamber.

I sighed frustratingly, threw the bedsheet on his bed, and walked away.

He couldn't determine what to do or what not to do simply because his feelings were changing. Also, why did he think that staying home was derogatory? Making a home was one of the most difficult jobs. Raising good children and having a peaceful home were areas where many struggled.

This Kingdom was mine as much as his. I have worked here for the last four years, and even if I had become his wife, obviously in different circumstances and not completely, I would still work hard for this Kingdom. It was not him who gave me these lovely people, but this Kingdom, and no work was less important.

Every person has different work, and all contributions are commendable way.

I exhaled deeply, walked out of his chamber, and returned to Nandani, where I found her feeding the baby princess.

I smiled, looking at her.

"How did it go?" she asked, caressing the baby's bald head, and I nodded slightly.

"Good,"

She smiled and patted the back of my hand when I sat beside her on the bed. “So, let’s start again,” she said, gulping silently before asking, “How did it go?”

I looked into her eyes and said, “It’s bad. He wants me to stop working and gain weight,” I remarked, unsure of what else to do besides working.

“I know. Did you two fight about it?” she asked, and I replayed everything that happened.

"It seems like," I said, and she nodded.

"So, is this the first fight?" she asked, and I furrowed my brows.

"Why are you romanticising it? Are we a happy couple, and the first fight is a kind of moment?” I tried to ask, but she said no.

“It’s a moment. I mean, the way you two got married looks like progress,” she said, pausing for a moment before asking, “By the way, who won?”

I shook my head, unable to believe her. “I don’t know,” I said as I stood up and left.

“You are not helping, Nandani,” I said as I walked away from there.

"Where are you going, by the way?" she asked from behind, and I turned to look at her.

"To see what's for dinner because I am the head maid of Suryagarh," I said, walking away toward the kitchen.

I didn't realize that throughout all the time I spent in the kitchen, my mind was stuck on the moment when he pulled the bedsheet off the mattress and handed it to me with a 'sorry.'

Dinner was ready, and I looked after everyone's plates until my gaze fell on his. I searched for everything he liked and looked at the attendant.

"Add jaggery to this one," I said.

The attendant added it and went to serve dinner to everyone.

After finishing my work, I had dinner and was about to return to Nandani with her milk when I noticed an attendant coming back with a dinner plate.

"What happened?" I asked, furrowing my brows, and she replied.

"Kunwar Agastya is not in his chamber.”

I looked at the plate momentarily and asked, "Where is he?"

She shook her head. "I don’t know. But he’s not in his chamber."

"Okay," I said before walking back to my room after giving the milk to Nandani.

I rolled under my comforter in my room, illuminated by the soft light of the lamp, gazing at the walls. They were as bare as my life. There were no floral designs like those in royal chambers. I understood what he was trying to convey, but he failed to see that my room wasn’t a chamber; the walls lacked floral designs, and sunlight didn’t fall directly on them.

I didn’t have a kingdom to run alongside a king or a business to finance, either. All I had was my extensive experience working in the kitchen and cleaning rooms, and I excelled at them.

I didn’t want to give up on those tasks because I wasn’t forced to do them; I enjoyed them. For me, it felt like taking care of my family and the surrounding people.

I exhaled deeply and closed my eyes to catch some sleep. I didn’t know where he had gone, but we had plans. He promised to take me out. Maybe he was angry with me, but why? He had no reason to be mad at me.

I never asked him to change anything he liked to do.

I was suddenly jolted out of my thoughts by a soft knock at my door.

I gazed at the door, wondering who might be there at such a late hour. However, dismissing the thought, I pushed aside the comforter and stood up to open the door.

I gasped as my gaze fell on a tall figure dressed in black, with kohl lining his eyes and a black turban wrapped around his head. I was taken aback to see him, but the moment I noticed his green eyes illuminated by the lamp’s yellow glow on his face, I recognized him.

“You… here?” I asked softly, quickly pulling him inside and closing the door behind us.

“What if someone sees you? What are you doing here? Men aren’t allowed here; this area is exclusively for women,” I said. He held out a bag in front of him and replied slowly, “We’re going out.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise as I furrowed my brows. “Where were you? Why didn’t you have dinner?” I asked, and he stared at me for a moment before responding, “I thought you wouldn’t question me about anything.”

I gritted my teeth slightly as he handed me the bag. "Change,"

I lowered my gaze, opened the bag, and asked, "What is this?" as I found a pair of clothes.

"These are men’s clothes," I pointed out, and he nodded.

“Yes,” he replied, leaning back against the door with his arms crossed over his chest. “Since we’re going out alone, it’s quite unsafe for a woman to be outside at night. So, put these on.” He made perfect sense to me, and I looked at him.

“Alright, wait outside,” I said, and he frowned his brows.

“I believe you mentioned people might see me standing out there,” he said, making me gulp silently as I looked around. It was just one room, and I couldn’t hide anywhere.

“Alright, turn around. I can’t change in front of you,” I said, and he chuckled softly, shaking his head.

"You had a problem with me watching you change before, so this time, I’ll watch you change with your knowledge," he said, and my eyes widened in shock.

"Change," he demanded shamelessly. The moment he muttered that word, a deep, cunning shiver ran down my spine, scaring and arousing me simultaneously.

The memory of him watching me the other day, sitting on the couch while sunlight fell on my body, filled my mind, and I couldn’t help but bite my lower lip while lowering my gaze.

“Change? In front of you? And you’ll just watch me?” I managed to ask, convinced I had misheard something. He lowered his gaze to my feet for a moment before staring back into my eyes again.

"Yes, take off your blouse and skirt and slip into those," His words caused a slight throbbing in my core, and I shook my head slowly.

"It's embarrassing," I managed to say, and he furrowed his brows and shook his head.

"Well, you complained that I watched you change, so this time, grant me the pleasure of watching you with your knowledge. And it could not be more intimidating than anything else. “ His words made my fingertips feel cold, and I fisted them tightly.

“Um, but Kunwarsa, I’ll feel ashamed changing in front of you,” I tried to say with a pleading tone, and he gritted his teeth slightly.

I didn’t know, but he looked cute even when he was angry.

“Then you can turn your face away from me,” he said, and I sighed in frustration.

"So, you would not listen to me?" I asked. He scratched his jaw with his index finger for a moment and then shook his head.

“Umm, you have already accused me of not listening to you. So, I am standing up for my allegations,” he said, and I gritted my teeth at his stubbornness.

“Why are you even upset?” I asked, finally letting the bag drop to the floor and covering my face with my hand.

“I’m not angry. Do I look angry?” he said, and I sighed in frustration as I looked at him.

"Fine, fine, fine, how can I make it up to you?” I said, feeling like I was already losing in front of him. His brothers had raised a spoiled prince who would neither listen nor understand.

“I’m not angry. So, you don’t have to do anything to make it up to me. After all, I go out to meet girls at night, I flirt with Rashmika, I watch you undressed without your knowledge, and so on. So, you don’t—“

"You watching me naked without my knowledge was true," I cut him off, and he exhaled deeply.

"I lay naked in your lap. You did not have any problem that day. Why is your body a body and mine is not a body?" He said in a slightly frustrated tone, and my mouth hung open.

“But you knew I was watching you,” I attempted to say, and he lowered his gaze.

“I’m not talking to you. Just change,” he said, and I bit my lips and shook my head.

“Sorry, I don’t feel like going out. You can go,” I said, swallowing hard as I noticed him watching me.

He remained silent for a moment and nodded. “Okay, as you wish,” he said, then opened the door and left.

I felt bad. A painful ache erupted in my heart, watching him leave.

I did not know what had suddenly happened between us. Kneeling down, I looked at the bag he had brought me.

Maybe I was being too stubborn. Maybe we both didn’t need to stretch it further. Maybe we could talk without dragging up the past.

I mean, I wasn’t offended the day he saw me changing. I don’t know why I brought it up today—just to have something to say in return.

But it did nothing but hurt him. It did not bring us closer. Sometimes, in a relationship, one has to overlook a few things. One of them was the past. The past is called because it was in the past.

I sighed deeply and walked toward the door, but my steps froze when I heard a soft knock.

I gulped silently and looked at myself, wondering if I looked presentable or not.

However, the moment I opened the door, my heart skipped a beat, and a slight smile attempted to appear on my lips.

He lifted his gaze from the floor and looked at me.

"I came back to find out why you are angry?” he questioned slowly, and I heard the distant sound of anklet bells.

“Someone’s coming here,” I said, quickly pulling him inside the room.

His eyes widened in shock as I asked.

"What are you doing here again?" My voice came out a whisper, and he pouted, looking at me, and said.

"I did not want to hurt you," he said, and I inhaled deeply, silently, and stared at him blankly.

After a brief pause, I managed to speak in a slow voice. “I know,”

He gulped and closed his eyes while holding my arm and pulling me closer to him, slowly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you,” his words made me shut my eyes. “I just want you to respect yourself. Because if you don’t respect yourself, people

won't respect you. Respect your boundaries, your timing, and everything. There's no need to overburden yourself. You're already doing more than enough for us. Why do you always think that if you don't do something, the chores won't get done? Trust me, they will get done." He said in a slow voice, and I inhaled deeply and nodded, gulping silently before speaking.

"This isn't overburdening, Kunwarsa. I care for Nandani, Ranaji, Prince Ranvijay, Princess Aishwarya, and the people of this kingdom. I don't mind staying up late or getting up early to take care of them,"

He remained silent and kissed my forehead before saying, "Alright, as you see fit."

I smiled before releasing the hug, and he said. "Alright, change,"

And my brows thinned in a line with confusion and disbelief. "Still?" I asked, and he nodded shamelessly.

"Yes, you didn't want to change in front of me because we were fighting. Now it's resolved. Change," he said.

I blinked silently, trying to find something to say, but nothing came to mind except, "And you would watch me?"

He leaned back against the door and nodded.

"Of course, I am your husband, and I have already seen enough, and I want to see you naked. I do not see any problem in that except if you do not want me to," He said, and I nodded, appreciating that my consent did matter to him.

So, as a reward, I nodded.

"Alright," I said, inhaling quietly as I picked up the bag in my arms.

I removed the top and bottom of my menswear and looked at his grey, shameless eyes, which bore into mine. A tint of shame was climbing up my cheeks, and I lowered my gaze to hide it amid the candlelight falling over me.

Standing in front of him in a small, closed room, I moved my hand to untuck the end of my Dupatta from the band of my skirt. I lowered it to the floor, letting it fall off my shoulder. I felt a slight tightness in my lower abdomen as he watched me silently, taking my hands towards my back.

I lowered my gaze, trying to find the end of the blouse's strings, and pulled it low. At that moment, I could not see his eyes, especially since I knew that he was watching me, not from afar but just from three feet away.

The strings of my blouse loosened, and I felt my nipples erected in the heat of this moment, and just when I was about to pull the shoulder of my blouse down, I heard the slight movement of his turning his face opposite to me.

A timid smile crossed my face, and he noticed my discomfort, which he acknowledged in a slow voice. "Just because, we still have to make it official," he said in his typical Agastya-coded voice, and I smiled.

But he had already seen me enough. "That's okay, you can watch me change," I said in a slow voice, and the last thing I expected was for him to turn back.

But he shamelessly turned back and smirked, looking at me.

"Since you said that I do not listen to you, I am listening to you," he said in a slow voice, and I pulled the blouse off my body.

I felt timid with his gaze on me, and I could not help but shake my head. "You are impossible," I said.

He chuckled softly. "And you are beautiful. The ink on your skin is the most stunning thing I have ever seen," he said in a slow, deep voice as I felt his gaze become intense. His breathing slowed slightly, and I bit my lower lip while slipping my arms into the sleeves of my top.

I tied the strings of the top to secure it, then looked at him. He unfrozen from his position and began walking towards me.

"Let me help," he said slowly as I looked into his eyes, focusing on the knots at the top.

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have said that," I agreed, and he lifted his gaze and shook his head.

"You don't have to apologize. I should be," he said, his fingers moving to the next string. "But I'm not sorry for the other day—watching you change without your awareness," he continued. I blinked nervously, feeling his fingers silently gliding toward the side of my waist. I felt his fingers hook into the knot of my skirt.

"I thin—" But before I could finish, he unfastened it.

My heart raced as I felt the skirt fall down to my feet, revealing my legs. Thankfully, the top ended at my thighs, covering the main part of me.

I gazed into his green oceans, warming me against the midnight chill. His fingers brushed against my thighs, causing me to inhale sharply. Yet, I pressed my lips together to conceal the effect his presence had on me.

"May I?" His words made me blink nervously, and I could not help but feel a wave of sparks running over my skin, and his fingers crawled on my thighs.

I nodded, unable to shake my head in a 'No.' There was no reason, either.

He leaned in closer, and I felt his lips just an inch away from mine, brushing softly against them while his fingers moved up the space between my legs.

My lashes were forced close to feel the manly touch. A few moments passed, absorbing the new feeling of his finger gently brushing against my sensitive skin.

"Does my touch feel good?" he asked slowly, and I nodded gently.

I felt him pecking my lips, and he muttered.

"Then, my tongue would do wonders." The moment he said this, a strong, icy shiver ran down my spine. Before I could react

or do anything, I felt him kneeling down before me.

I clenched my fist when I saw him on his knees before me. My gaze flitted timidly as he slowly leaned closer to my thighs, brushing his lips just above my knees.

“What are you doing?” I asked, unable to understand why he was kneeling down before me.

“I am going to suck your crown,” he muttered slowly, causing me to gulp nervously.

“No, no, you can’t,” I said as he kissed my thighs, deeper this time. I stumbled on my feet and placed my hand on his head, trying to push him away, and he asked, “Why?”

I shook my head dizzily and tried to speak. “You are a Prince. I am just…,” his lips traveled to the top of my thighs, “I am just a commoner…” I felt his lips lifting my shirt and slowly moving towards the darker part of me. “A maid,”

I spoke, but it felt futile as he pressed his lips against my center.

An uncontrollable shiver ran through my body when he parted his lips and gently sucked me hard. “Ahh,” I couldn’t help but exhale sharply.

I could not help but exhale sharply.

As his lips caressed my core, I couldn’t help but lift half of my weight onto my feet. With his face digging deeper between my thighs, I widened my legs slightly to give him the space he so desperately needed.

“Kunwarsa,” the words caught in my throat, and I couldn’t help but thread my fingers through his hair. His fingers gripped my thighs, and suddenly, he drew me closer, making me tremble on my feet. “Ahhh,”

Fear ran through my nerves, and I tightened my fist in his hair.

The way his lips curled against me, my eyes rolled behind and closed slowly.

"Does it feel good?" His slow, deep, and husky voice made me weak in my knees. I felt as if I had been summoned yet set free by him.

The closed room made me free out of breath all of a sudden, and the moment the gentle caresses and sucking turned into a hard nibble, my body shivered in anticipation.

"Ahhhh, do not bite me, please," I requested in a slow voice, and my finger had now pulled his face placer into my core with anticipation.

He kept sucking me, and I felt him pulling my leg up and putting it over his shoulder. My legs parted even more. And, I felt like with a thin rope and trapped between pleasure and fall.

I felt vulnerable, open to being played and seduced.

But his care and perfection made me feel as if I was cherished more than before played.

"Aaannhhhh,” A deep and trembling moan escaped my lips when the soft suck geared into the deep, brutal one, determined to pull the extra skin out of me into his mouth, nibbling it, smoothing it, licking and most importantly, claiming it.

"Let me taste you, Suman," his words added an extra flavor to the art. With my closed eyes and rolled head, I could not help but move my hips gently against his mouth.

"Yes, like that," he muttered, and a fire lit in me, heading to shut his words.

He groaned against me, and all of a sudden, the wetness turned into the river and soaked his lips and jaw in the process. And, I broke into trembling shudders of pleasure running through me.

"Ahhh, Kunwar Agastya," My moan came out insanely slow.

He served me a few last gentle licks and brought me down from the high of the pleasuring mountains, and I opened my eyes to notice his wet lips.

Nothing aroused me more than his green eyes, messy hair, and wet lips.

I tried to catch on my breath, and he sucked on his lips while muttering.

"Apparently, you taste sweeter after anger.” His words brought a timid smile to my lips, and I tried to say, grabbing the lower of the dress.

"That does not mean you will make me angry all the time," I said and took a few steps away from him to slip into the lower.

He stood up, sucking his lips, cleaning them with the cuff of his wrist, and I gulped with nervousness and shame.

"What was that about?" I asked slowly, and he chuckled, wrapping the turban around his head.

"That was me apologizing," he said, and I furrowed my brows.

"That's how you apologize to your brothers?"

He glared at me intensely for a moment, and I shook my head.

"That's okay; you don't have to answer," I said, standing in front of him and asking if I looked alright.

He smiled at me and pulled out a fake mustache from his pocket, and I couldn’t help but giggle.

"You have a fake mustache?"

He stepped closer, kissed my nose gently, and nodded.

"Yes,"

He carefully applied it over my mustache line and pressed it to stick with the gum. I couldn’t resist bringing my fingers closer to his lips, rubbing them off gently.

"You look better like a man," he said, and I lightly slapped his chest.

"Don't you dare," I glared at him, and he furrowed his brows.

"Haven't you ever felt like you wanted to be a man?" he asked, and I gulped silently before asking, "Why would you think that?"

He lowered his gaze for a moment and said, "All the women I've met once said that they would want to be a man if given the chance."

His words made my chest feel tight, but I shook my head.

"No, I would never want to be a man. The way men are raised, they are filled with the mindset that they can take control of everything. Just because they are providers—whether it's a home, kingdom, or finances—they are given the utmost advantage along with that. They could have another woman simply because they could. They make the rules for themselves and for us, and their rules are nothing but unfair advantages to them. And despite all this, they want us women to be grounded and hidden so that no other men will touch us. Imagine if men were raised with the right mentality; there would be no need for brothels. But sadly, women are often considered the reason for their disloyalty too. They say, oh, she wouldn't be able to fulfill his needs. I mean, how many needs do they have? Why is it always about what they wan—"

"He died," he cut me off, and I inhaled sharply, remembering that he was gone. The man who ruined all men for me had died.

"He is gone," he said again, wrapping his arm around me gently.

"I know it's been difficult. But you are brave and strong because you've been through what many couldn't even imagine,"

His words weighed heavily on my chest, and I exhaled deeply, trying to calm myself.

"We should go," I managed to say as I released the hug, and he nodded.

"Yes, but before we leave, do your hair; you have to hide it," he said, and I furrowed my brows, unable to think of how I would hide my healthy hair.

"Maybe make a bun and wrap a turban," he suggested, and I nodded.

I quickly made a tight bun, and he wrapped the cloth around my head.

"But you still look feminine," he said, and I couldn't help but think back to his shawl that I had.

I immediately took it out and wrapped it around myself.

"How do I look now?"

I asked, and he smiled as he looked at me.

"Perfect, and your name is Eklavya, and you don't know how to speak," he said, and I questioned immediately, "Why?"

He smiled, "Because you have a really sweet voice that couldn't be changed." His words made a lot of sense to me, and I nodded, "Alright."

He held my hand, and we both walked toward the door. As he opened it, he stepped outside first, checking to see if everything was okay.

"Come out," he said slowly, and I felt butterflies in my stomach already. I didn't know why, but the thought of anyone finding us made me feel sick all of a sudden.

I stepped outside, trying to calm my racing heart, looking around to see if someone was watching.

Suddenly, while watching me back as he walked forward, he bumped his head into a pole, and a soft cry escaped his mouth.

"Aaaaaaghh,"

My eyes widened in shock before bursting into laughter.

"Hahahahaha,"

He stared at me while rubbing his head and smiled.

"I did that on purpose to make you smile," he said, and I couldn't help but laugh even more.

"Sometimes, you don't even behave like a prince," I teased, and he led me silently through the galleries, avoiding detection, replying,

"Everyone is a normal human before they're a king, prince, maid, or anything else. Life is thousands of times more beautiful when you just stick to that."

His words made me feel good, and I looked at him as he took me to the horse stable.

"Won't the soldiers at the door notice us?"

I tried to ask, and he looked at me for a moment with a smile while untying his horse and rubbing its neck.

"I don't care,"

He said, leaning in to kiss the jet-black horse and rubbed its forehead.

"That's my wife,"

He said to the horse, and I gulped nervously, glancing at it looking back at me. It lifted its front legs and neighed a little.

"That's okay; she doesn't weigh much," he muttered in its ear, and he inhaled sharply.

"Give me your hand," he said, and I moved my hand closer to him.

"Doesn't he recognize me? I mean, the you saved me," I tried to say, looking at him as I put my hand on his forehead.

"He does, but I'm making you two friends,"

I smiled and took a step closer, rubbing its forehead lovingly.

"Hey," I muttered.

"What's his name?"

I asked.

"Ashwait," he replied, and I smiled.

"What a beautiful name, Ashwait," I said, looking at him as he calmed down from my caresses.

"Is he feeling good?" I asked, looking at him, and he nodded.

"Yes, better," he said, pulling my hand to the side.

"I want to climb on my own," I said, glancing at the footrest hanging from the horse's back.

"How do I do it?" I asked, and he smiled as he explained.

"Hold the hair here," he said, stroking the long hair on the horse's upper neck and showing me where to grip.

"Okay, then?" I muttered, holding his hair tightly. It was not soft but strong, and his skin had a lustrous shine. I could bet that he had a really good diet.

"Then, put your right foot here on the footrest and climb," he said. I gulped nervously as I placed my foot on it. It was taller than me. My legs felt small, and I could not reach it. He chuckled a little and muttered.

"Bass ek hi sapna tha hamara ki ladki lambi honi chahiye... kher ab vo bhi paani me gaya," "I only had one dream that the girl would be tall… but it also went down the drain,"

I shot him a glare, and he smiled a little while holding my waist and lifting me up to climb onto the horse.

I felt butterflies in my stomach as the horse's back felt shaky. I thought I might fall, but he quickly climbed behind me and wrapped his arm around me.

I gulped nervously, unable to stop smiling.

I had never been out with a man, and definitely not like this.

He took his shawl out of his small jute bag and pulled me closer. My back pressed against his chest as he wrapped the shawl around us, enveloping us both together. My head nestled in the crook of his shoulder while he rested his chin on me gently. "So, where should we head first?" he asked slowly, and I looked over my shoulder and murmured, "I don't know. Wherever you want."

He dragged the horse's reins, bringing Ashwait into motion. I tightened my fist around his wrist as he walked.

And suddenly, he ran.

My gut sank deeper. The world shook as he sprinted toward the main entrance. The door was closed, and the soldiers noticed us. They quickly got into action and started opening the door. For a moment, I thought we would crash against it, and I closed my eyes in fear. I tried not to scream with all my might, as I couldn't draw attention to my girlish voice. But the door opened with a loud, thunderous sound just in time, and we passed through. He laughed and kissed my cheek. The cold breeze hit my face like the frozen ice of a pond I had once witnessed in my life. I giggled and closed my eyes for a moment. It felt like freedom; the weight on my shoulders was suddenly lighter.

My fingers trembled, fisting tighter on his wrist, holding onto it as if this was what I had been looking for the whole of my life, bound yet free.

He kissed me again on the cheek, deeper and longer this time, and muttered, "This night is yours. Ask for whatever you want; all your wishes will be granted." he said, making a bright smile cross my lips. I glanced at the dark path ahead, feeling soothed by the sparkling moonlight.

We were riding on a slight incline, and I felt his weight shift on my back. Ashwait picked up speed as we raced down the slope, veering onto an empty, sandy path. The rhythm of the horse's hooves hitting the ground, our bouncing together on his back, and the icy air hitting my face sent goosebumps across my skin.

"Tell me, Suman, where do you want to spend the night?" he inquired. I bit my lower lip for a moment before softly replying, "To the cottage where we spent our first night." My tone was tinged with apprehension, and he leaned in to whisper.

"Are you sure?" he asked, slowing Ashwait as we neared the edge of a dense forest. I nodded slowly, my fingertips numbing from the cold.

As we entered the woods, the moonlight faded, and he drew close, whispering in my ear, "So, are you happy with me?" His gentle voice made me raise my brows playfully.

"Am I with you?"

His chuckle met my ears as he placed a soft kiss below my ear.

"You're not with me?"

As I spoke, my lashes grew heavy with his tender murmurs and feathery kisses.

"Not yet. The world doesn't know we're together," I replied slowly as he leaned in again.

"I've never grasped the need for societal validation. Why does the world need to know when two people share a connection? Their empty blessings don't matter," he said, and I paused to inhale deeply.

"It's not about validation; it's about claiming your territory and being responsible for one another," I attempted to explain,

receiving another gentle kiss from him.

“What do you mean?" he asked while I gazed at the stunning scenery around us.

“It means asserting that this person is yours, that no one else is allowed to harbor romantic feelings for him. It’s also about accountability. Animals do the same; they mark their territory and claim their mates,” I described, and he inhaled sharply at my ear.

"But, people will not support you. Even if you try to announce it, you’ll face challenges at every step,” he responded with furrowed brows. I looked confused. "What do you mean?”

“I witnessed my parents declare their illicit relationship to the world, trying to be seen as a legitimate marriage. But no one accepted it. After they passed, we weren’t allowed to live in the Kingdom; no one cared for us. We were always labeled as the Kingdom’s illegitimate children,” he related, and I took a sharp breath, listening intently.

"I didn’t know that," I confessed, blinking nervously. "I mean, not to this extent.”

“It’s irrelevant whether the world is aware. What counts is that you know. Relationships accepted by society can still involve betrayal and separations. The person unafraid of societal judgments doesn’t care what others think. They live their life on their own terms, filled with pride because they know judgments fade with time,” he stated, prompting me to bite my lower lip.

“That’s a way of advocating for fearlessness. But people of royal blood, like you, leave a legacy. Their actions are remembered and shape the future, setting an example for others. That’s the purpose of monarchy: to uphold righteousness," I articulated, watching a slight smile cross his face as I glanced over his shoulder.

“Wow, that’s impressive. You know a lot about politics," he remarked, catching me off guard.

“Umm, it’s merely my opinion. I mean..." I stumbled to find the right words.

“How much have you studied?" he asked, my gaze dropping in embarrassment.

“Um, I didn’t study much in my childhood. Just household chores, how to respect others, and such. But after my husband left and my parents abandoned me, one of my sisters urged me to seek work in Mahabaleshgarh. I passed all their tests and became one of Nandani's maids. We became close friends, and I shared everything with her while she studied. I began to take an interest in academics, and she welcomed that. I became her study partner, although she was always sharper than me. Learning the basics took time, but once I mastered reading and writing, we would read together and discuss. Nandani adored history, politics, and war, leading to passionate debates. She also cared for the common folk, often asking me to venture into the village for insights about the realities that didn’t reach the King. That’s how I learned,” I shared, and he held me tighter, stating,

“You know, very few truly grasp what royalty is meant to be. Most kings view it as power over people, but few understand that royals are meant to serve the people."

I nodded.

"Well, that's true, but I’m glad that Ranaji understands this well. In Mahabaleshgarh, Maharani Abhishree introduced many changes that had never happened before. And, you know, when King Ranvardhan was alive, the two of them would engage in very heated arguments about the people and the children. At that time, no one could have guessed how much they loved each other," I said, and he nodded.

"I really miss King Rajvardhan. I first met him on Holi," he said, and I chuckled.

"Yes, I sort of remember that," I replied.

"Yes, it was Bhabhisa and Bhaisa’s first Holi. Bhabhisa went to visit him, and that’s where I met him first. He was the first king I had seen who was down-to-earth, friendly, and understanding," he said, and I nodded.

"Yes, he was. He fought for me too. When my in-laws came to court demanding me back, he outright denied it," I said, and he looked at me in surprise.

"He did?"

I nodded widely and smiled.

"Yes, Nandani asked him to do that. He loved both of his children very much but adored Nandani a little more. Everyone knew he adored Nandani more than King Abhinandan. He could yell and argue with him, but he never raised his voice at her," I said, and he chuckled.

"That’s why she sometimes acts like a spoiled princess," he said, and I laughed.

"She’s actually sweet," I mentioned, and he kissed my cheek.

"But I didn’t like it when she raised her hand to you," he said, and I shook my head.

"You know, she cared about me more than my actual mother ever did. Not every slap is derogatory," I replied, and he inhaled sharply near my neck.

"Do you remember when I hid behind you during that Holi?" he asked slowly, and I nodded timidly.

"Yes, but at that time, I felt angry," I managed to say softly.

"Why?"

I laughed a little before saying,

"Because I hate Holi. It feels like forced fun," I explained, and he laughed a bit while tightening his arm around my waist.

"You’re cute sometimes," he said, and I furrowed my brows.

"Well, what’s cute about that?" I asked, and he nudged his nose below my ear.

"I don’t know. Your rigid opinions on everything," he replied, and I inhaled sharply, turning my head to look at him.

"Rigid opinions?" I asked, and he nodded.

"Yeah, your beliefs are very rigid. It might come from your trauma, but you tend to judge people really quickly," he said slowly, and I furrowed my brows again.

"No, I don’t judge people. I mean, I don’t!" I tried to protest and added, "And my beliefs aren’t rigid; they’re based on personal experiences."

He smiled and nodded.

"Every person, every experience in life is new, Suman. You slice an apple, and if it turns out to be rotten, that doesn’t mean all apples are rotten. You just ignore it and slice another one," he said, and I nodded, biting my lip.

"But you know, when you find a rotten apple and go out to buy another one, you check extra hard to see if it’s fresh or not. That’s what experience teaches you," I tried to argue.

He nodded. "But that doesn’t mean you should hurt the other apple in the process by judging it and pointing fingers at it. In life, people aren’t apples. Sometimes, like you, they’re holding their traumas too. And when you point fingers and question them, they feel nothing but more broken. It’s like no one trusts them, and that hurts," he said, and I inhaled deeply, caressing the back of his hand gently.

"Did I say something that hurt you?" I managed to ask, looking at the cottage in front of us.

"Umm, not much," he replied, and I felt his hand pull the reins of the horse to bring it to a halt.

I was unaware, but his words made me realize that something I said was troubling him.

"We are here," he stated as he dismounted the horse. I smiled when he effortlessly held my waist and lowered me down.

"How are you so strong?" I inquired, and he grinned.

"Children who don’t see their parents are strong," he explained, and I furrowed my brows, shaking my head.

"No, I mean, physically," I clarified slowly while watching him tie Ashwait’s rope to a tree.

He chuckled. "Oh, my dinner keeps me healthy."

I rolled my eyes, feeling him take my hand as he said, "Come with me, love," drawing out the last word as I giggled softly.

"Love?" I echoed, and he nodded, biting his lower lip.

"Your name is Suman, and if I give you a nickname like Summu, Summa, or something else, the kids will tease you. So, 'Love' works well," he explained, and I asked as we entered the cottage, and he opened the door.

"Which kids?"

He looked at me with furrowed brows and replied,

"Our children." I felt a blush creeping onto my cheeks.

"Our children? I didn’t expect that," I managed to say while removing his shawl and hanging it on the rope in the cottage.

"Oh, you didn’t see us coming into this cottage?" he teased, and my eyes widened in disbelief.

"No, but that doesn’t mean it's for children," I protested, and he laughed, pulling me closer and pressing his lips to mine.

"How about a change of plans?" he whispered against my lips.

"How about a change of plans?" I whispered against her lips, and she nuzzled me away, a blush creeping onto her cheeks. "No, no plans to change," she giggled, stepping back a few paces. I moved closer to take her hand, but she laughed and darted away. "No change of plans, Kunwarsa," she called, and I chuckled, chasing after her. "Hey, don't run!" I shouted firmly, and she turned back to look at me before leaving the cottage.

"You can't stop me," she teased as I followed her.

The bright moonlight illuminated her, filling me with sudden joy. She playfully displayed her thumb, prompting me to shake my head. "Suman, if I catch you, you'll regret it," I warned, eliciting her laughter.

"Hahaha, catch me first, Kunwarsa," she teased, giggling as I approached her.

She stepped back behind a tree, peeking at me. The soft sounds of the flowing river mingled with the silence of nature and the chaos in my heart. I longed to spend time with her as much as she seemed to want, unaware of the uncertain future ahead—the looming war I wished none of my brothers would have to fight. Our enemy was unknown, and my older brother had just welcomed a baby, while my middle brother was blissfully married to a wonderful woman who adored him. I didn't want to shatter any families.

"You can't catch me!" she squealed, sprinting away. And without realizing it, she was becoming my home, too. "Suman, don't go too far! There might be lions, tigers, or even crocodiles!" I joked, and she stepped closer.

"I hate crocodiles," she replied, rushing toward me, prompting my laughter. "Well, now I've caught you," I claimed, wrapping my arms around her tightly. "You cheated!" she protested, playfully pushing against my chest.

"Come with me," I said, grasping her hand and leading her to the riverbank.

"Where are we headed?" she asked. I wasn't sure, but there was something different about her smile today—it made her look more vibrant and beautiful. Once we reached the riverside, with its elegantly arranged, smoothly polished stones, I suggested we sit here in silence.

"Are you still mad at me?" she inquired, glancing at me while walking on the stones.

"No, why would I be?" I replied slowly, though I felt a twinge of hurt. She was the one person I had confided in, hoping she wouldn't judge or despise me. It stung when she brought up a sensitive issue during an argument.

But I realized she had the power to hurt me, right? She had endured more, and I could empathize with her struggles. I understood her fears about falling in love with me. Wait! Did I just say love?

"It's because I just mentioned you go to brothels," she stated, drawing my gaze as I pulled her closer. "Isn't that the essence of a relationship? Being able to share anything?" I asked, and she smiled softly. "Maybe," she replied quietly, and I focused on a large stone beside the river. "Let's sit there," I suggested, and she smiled as she settled on the stone.

"Alright," she said, and I caressed her cheek tenderly. Let me gather some firewood," I told her. She nodded in response, her gaze fixed on me. Ji," she affirmed, watching as I collected dry branches. I glanced back at her and noticed her smiling face.

"Kunwarsa," she called, and I turned to her. "Hmmm?" I hummed in response. "Is everything okay between you and Princess Rashmika?" she asked as I handed her the wood I had gathered.

"Why do you ask?" I replied, stepping away to gather more wood and also grabbing two smooth stones to start the fire. "Because she's your fiancée," she answered, and I looked up at her. "She's not," I insisted, watching as she approached, wrapping her arms around my neck and leaning on my back. "Looks like my husband is lying to me," she said, pressing her cheek against mine and making me smile involuntarily.

"Husband? That's quite a title to give me," I joked as the fire blazed. "You're doing all the hard work; I thought I should reward you for it," she said as I pulled her onto my lap.

She giggled, gazing into my eyes. "That's not the only hard work I'm managing," I replied, and she playfully tightened her grip around my neck. "I can't see any other efforts; maybe my eyes need checking!" she teased, and I smiled back at her. "Perhaps you deserve a little punishment," I suggested, making her giggle and hug me tightly.

I inhaled her enchanting scent, feeling momentarily lost. "Are you heading into battle?" she asked softly, and I struggled to find my words, shaking my head subtly. She continued, "Don't lie to me, at least."

I held her closer, trying to explain, "Not a full-blown war, just a battle." She released my hug and searched my eyes. "Just a battle?" she asked, lovingly cupping my face.

"Just a minor battle. Need to kill a few people," I said in a slow voice, and she chuckled, leaning in closer to my cheek.

"Why are you so hard to handle?" she murmured before gently kissing my cheek, and I replied, "Maybe you should try harder."

She smiled and gazed into my eyes. Slowly, she said, "I apologize for anything I said to you." I pressed my forehead against hers in response.

"Don't apologize. I enjoyed our arguments," she laughed, hearing me, though my heart felt unexpectedly heavy.

I wished for time to stand still at that moment.

"Suman," I called softly, and she met my gaze.

"Ji,"

"What do you expect from me?" I asked deliberately while admiring the warm glow from the nearby fire on her face.

"What do you mean?" she asked, nestling in my lap, leaning against my chest while facing the fire.

"I mean, I want to know what kind of husband you envision marrying," I clarified, noticing her discomfort with her turban.

I moved my hands to her head and removed it.

She glanced over her shoulder and muttered, "Umm, I've never considered it."

"Well, you have all night to think it over," I replied, loosening her hair from its bun.

She smiled, pulling her hair to the front, and murmured, "I want my husband to be understanding."

"And?" I probed further, taking off the fake mustache from her face.

"And," she hesitated, "I want him to be intelligent, unlike you," she teased, raising my brows.

"Unlike me?" I echoed, gently cupping her jaw and neck.

She nodded slightly, yielding to the soft strokes of my thumb on her jaw.

"And?" I persisted slowly, leaning closer to her ear, feeling her cheeks flush from the fire's warmth.

"And," she inhaled deeply before whispering, "now, I want him to be you."

Her words made me close my eyes, and I kissed her ear.

"You are beautiful," I couldn't help but remark.

"Tell me something I don't already know," she murmured, and I breathed against the curve of her neck, responding softly and deeply. "And I find you fuckable since the day we got half married,"

She shivered slightly in my arms and touched my wrist, tilting her head to the side.

"And?" she muttered, bringing a smile to my face.

"And I can't do that," I murmured in response.

"Why?" she questioned in a slow and sensual voice, and I couldn't help but nudge my nose against her cheek, whispering.

"You need to fulfill your bet first."

She gulped slowly and looked into my eyes. "Can't you get over that?"

I bit my lip and shook my head. "No, I'm strict about bets," I replied, and she smiled timidly at me.

"But I don't know how to do that," she said, reminding me once again, and I responded,

"Well, if you're determined, you can learn," I said slowly as she lowered her gaze to my lips for a moment.

"What about learning by watching?" she muttered slowly, and I struggled to control my wide smile as I asked, "You want to see?"

She bit her lower lip slightly and asked, "Is it too far?"

I shook my head. "No, not too far," then I asked, "Do you want to go?"

She gulped silently and nervously, nodding a little. "A little," she admitted, and I chuckled, helping her stand up immediately.

"Okay, then let's go," I said, and she widened her eyes. "What about the fire?"

She asked, and I replied, taking her to the Ashwait. "It will keep the wild animals away from here."

She giggled, and I quickly helped her tie a turban around her hair bun. She swiftly fashioned the turban and applied the fake mustache.

We both dashed toward the crowded area of the nearby Kingdom where this facility was available. Since it was late at night, the market would be closed.

After a while, we reached our destination, and I secured Ashwait away from the old palace.

"What is this place?" she asked. I took her hand and led her inside.

"Remember, you cannot speak," I reminded her as I guided her through the busy crowd toward an old *haveli*.

I sensed her slight nervousness through her hand, but the way her eyes scanned the crowd and the late-night market showed her curiosity.

"This way," I said, guiding her down a narrow lane toward the back door of the Haveli and knocking on the wooden door.

She looked at me, and I smiled at her flushed cheeks.

"Who is this?" a manly voice caught our attention as the door opened.

"Is Dance Under Moon open?" I asked slowly, and he scanned us briefly before nodding.

"Yes," he replied, then asked, "What is your name?"

"Bhan Singh," I said, watching his gaze shift to her. "This is Eklavya. She can't speak and is getting married next month, you know," I added with a smirk, and he chuckled.

"All right," he welcomed us, and I noticed her taking in the decorations and lighting of the place. This was a well-hidden spot in the Kingdom, accessible only to princes and individuals from wealthy territories.

I saw her eyes widen, noticing the women mingling with men.

"Public or private?" he asked, turning back to me, and I looked at her and muttered, "Private. No disturbances, dim lighting, and some food." He nodded before guiding us to the third floor of the Haveli.

He opened the door for us, letting us inside a vast room adorned with red carpets, curtains, and a stage surrounded by fire torches attached to stands. There was a couch with minimal lighting, meaning the performers would overlook the audience.

"You two wait here," he instructed. We walked toward the couch as he drew the curtains, leaving a two-foot gap to let us watch.

"They'll be here in a few moments," he said, and I noticed a few attendees entering with dry fruits and peanuts to snack on.

"Thank you," I said softly, dismissing them.

"Is this a brothel?" she asked in a low voice once they left, and I shook my head.

"No, it's not a brothel. Sex for money is prohibited here. It's only for entertainment and educational purposes. Young princes come here for grooming, you know," I explained slowly, and she nodded.

"Oh,"

"Are you okay?" I asked, leaning back against the couch and pulling her closer so her head rested on my chest. She hesitated for a moment but then relaxed.

"Yes, just feeling different," she said, and I watched as the performers entered the room and locked the door behind them.

Suman

I watched two people enter the dimly lit, warm room. The sudden change of plans caused my heartbeat to drop. I felt his fingers gently feathering the back of my hand, and I couldn't help but move closer to him as he wrapped his shawl around me.

"Are you comfortable?" he asked softly, whispering into my ear. I nodded slightly.

"It's okay. You can speak in a slow voice," he said. I gulped nervously, gripping his wrist wrapped around my waist and resting in my lap.

His other hand gently rubbed my arm as I asked,

"What exactly will they do?"

My voice emerged slowly and fearfully, eliciting a light chuckle from him, tinged with teasing.

"Whatever you wish,"

his words sparked something within me, and I felt his lips brush against my ear.

I gazed silently at the couple ascending the stage, and suddenly the music began. The low beats intertwined with the high pitch of the tabla, harmonizing beautifully with the flute's melody, easing the chaos in my mind.

The couple wore long gowns that touched their feet. They stood facing each other, watching with different perspectives.

The tabla beats slowed briefly as the flute sound grew while they circled each other.

A slight smile appeared as I watched them nestled in his warm embrace and protective arms. The couple stepped closer, their eye contact becoming intense, and butterflies erupted in my stomach when the man slowly wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned in to kiss her. I gulped nervously. The tabla started beating again as they deepened the kiss right in front of us, but they seemed unbothered. Suddenly, the girl pulled back, looking into his eyes with a hint of pain and agony.

His brows thinned, and I wondered if they were doing some act.

She ran away from him, but he immediately pulled him back, colliding her into his chest and fisting her hair.

My heart raced as I watched them, and Kunwarsa whispered in my ear. "Are you liking it?"

I bit my lips and buried half my face in his shawl, silencing him softly. "Shhhh,"

I could feel him smiling as he lovingly kissed my cheek.

The man kissed her again, this time with a fierce passion, and she surrendered to him. Gradually, he turned her to face away from him, revealing her beautiful white face and long hair, her gaze directed downward.

He started unknotting her dress, and now my chest began to rise and settle low with the breath. With the painful slowness, he pulled the shoulder of her dress down, revealing her milk-white naked body.

I gasped slowly, unable to stop myself from speaking in a soft voice. "She is beautiful,"

I felt his smile and gulped nervously, seeing her perfectly carved body. She did not have any fat or extra hair on her body. Her breasts were medium-sized, perfect, and tight, and I slowly turned my gaze to look at him watching her.

I bet Kunwarsa wasn't even seeing them as he murmured slowly against my cheeks, "Not more beautiful than you."

I couldn't help but smile as I turned my gaze back to her.

Her gown slipped down, and she turned to face her man, revealing her perfect hips. He wrapped his hand around the back of her waist and slowly slid it lower on her hips, giving them a gentle squeeze.

I felt a knot in my stomach when I saw it, and I asked slowly, "Why would he do that?"

He inhaled deeply and muttered in my ear slowly. "It feels good,"

My brows furrowed, and I bit my lower lip as the man began to kneel before her, leaving kisses on her neck, chest, and stomach. He rested one of her legs on his shoulder before placing his lips on her core.

I blinked silently, remembering the moment Kunwarsa did that to me.

"Do you mean like kissing us there?" I asked slowly, and he nodded, rubbing his cheek against mine.

"I do not know about other men, but I surely loved sucking your honey water," his words dried my throat, and suddenly, the woman moaned and clung to the man's hair with her fingers.

I tightened my fist on his wrist and watched the woman moving her hips against his mouth faster and harder. She started touching her breast, squeezing one of her nipples, and suddenly, the man made her lay on the mattress beneath them, and I shivered a little.

With hesitation, I lowered my gaze for a moment, but I glanced back at them as a different woman within me took control.

"What else would you like to do to me?" I attempted to ask slowly as he brushed his lips against my earlobe, whispering deliberately and slowly.

I gulped, hearing him say, "Whatever you would enjoy, no limits," and looked at the man taking off his clothes, and the moment my eyes watched him naked and rubbing his hardness, I felt something in my gut. I imagined him to Kunwarsa.

I momentarily moved my gaze off of him, knowing that my man was with me, but the scene before me was too much to ignore.

The woman sat up, and the man stood up on his knees before her. I watched her moving her long hair away from her face and body to the behind, and the man cupped her cheek, slowly bringing her face closer to his manhood.

I gulped nervously when she opened her mouth and took it in.

My lips curled inward to be punished by my teeth, and he whispered slowly in my ear.

"That's what you should do after losing the bet." His words made me feel flushed, and I watched her silently, taking the whole of him inside her mouth. She gagged suddenly, and I felt my stomach twisting, watching it.

Unknowingly, the image of Kunwarsa sitting on his bed and me doing it blurred my vision, causing me to shake my head slowly.

"That's too much," I whispered in a slow voice, and he kissed my cheek with a slow whisper. "That's okay. No pressure,"

I felt the haze climbing up on my mind as I saw the woman sucking his hardness. And he held her hair back and guided her moves according to him.

"Would you also do that?" I asked in a slow voice, and he questioned in a slow voice. "What?"

"What he is doing, I mean, the way he is moving her head on him?" I spoke in a slow voice and turned to look into his eyes, watching me, which I could feel even through the darkness.

I immediately cupped his cheek and angled his face to them, which he quickly brought back to me.

"If you want me to," he muttered, and I could see his body heating up.

"Ohh," I muttered and looked back at the couple.

They continued doing it until she gagged three times more, joggled him down on the mattress, and sat in his lap, putting her legs beside either side of his waist.

He placed his hands on her hips as she slowly guided herself onto him, enclosing him within her.

I felt a tightness in my core as they began doing it. But something was different about them. He was moving her hips slowly against him. They started kissing each other while she was rocking in his lap. He groaned in her mouth, and I bit on my lips.

I remembered when Kunwarsa had me sit on his lap. He made me feel him through the fabric between us, and I felt released just by that.

It was too much.

They continued doing it, and suddenly, the woman moved off his lap and turned opposite to him, weighing herself on her hands and knees.

My brows thinned with confusion.

"What is she doing?" I asked slowly, and he muttered in my ear.

"Keep watching, love," my cheeks flushed with warmth as the man knelt and pushed into her from behind.

She moaned louder, and the melody of the instruments also increased along with that. She lay unguarded in front of him, and he started pounding himself into her, slowly at first, and then he did something that twisted something in my stomach.

He held her hair in the fist and pulled her face back a little.

She cried out loud.

"He's hurting her," I said, glancing at him, and he shook his head slowly.

"No, he isn't. She's enjoying it," he intoned, and I furrowed my brows in confusion.

"Why would she enjoy her hair pulled like that?" I questioned, and he kissed my cheek.

"A bit of pain is sweet in lovemaking," he said slowly, and I turned my gaze back to them.

Well, he was not even watching. He did not know.

Leaving her hair, he held both sides of her waist and started thrusting into her faster. She collided on the mattress, pressing her face into the sheets, and I tightened my fist on his wrist while asking. "Would you also enjoy doing something like that to me?"

He laughed softly, taking his time, and whispered in my ear, "Trust me, you're going to beg me to do it this way."

His words made me feel wetter in my core than before, and I gulped silently. "No, I would never," I muttered slowly, and he stayed silent.

Suddenly, they both shifted their positions, and I looked at the man lying on the mattress and the girl sitting on him, taking him in.

I felt his face tilting into my cheek and stroked his wrist. He asked in a slow voice. "Would you also enjoy riding me like that?"

A smile spread across my face as I gulped and slowly muttered back, "Trust me, you're going to beg me to do it this way."

He laughed slowly and kissed my cheek.

"You are the only woman I can beg wholeheartedly to," He muttered slowly, and I smiled, watching the woman riding the man slowly and perfectly. She was rolling her hips on him in a circle, and I thinned my brows with confusion.

"Does it feel good to man?" I asked in a slow voice, and he nodded.

"It does, and imagine watching you naked, riding me, and you are moaning my name; ahhhhh, that would be such a treat," He said in a teasing voice, and I slapped his hand slowly.

"Shut up; my imagination is slow," I said in a slow voice, and suddenly, the woman stood up from him, and the man followed.

My brows furrowed in confusion when the man pinned the woman against the pole in the corner of the stage and suddenly

lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“What’s he doing?” I asked right away, and he whispered slowly.

"Living my dream,"

I gritted my teeth and watched the man thrusting into the woman while standing, holding her up in a hug.

Her moans became harder and louder, and just imagining it happening to me gave me goosebumps.

Kunwarsa was taller than this man, even more muscular and stronger than him. He would have the bigger one, too. That means I would be moaning louder than her.

“Is that your dream?” I asked slowly as he nodded, rubbing his cheek against mine.

"Yes," he muttered.

I bit my lip and shook my head shyly. “I will die, Kunwarsa,”

He cupped my cheek, and I couldn’t help but close my eyes as he pressed his lips against mine, sucking gently and then harder.

“That’s okay. Only this kind of death is allowed for you to enjoy,” he muttered against my lips as I asked in a slow voice. "Shall we go now?"

He kissed my lips again and muttered. "As you wish, Sumanika Ji,"

And I could not stop myself from giggling.

But, suddenly, my attention was caught by those couple. Her moans filled the room, and suddenly, he pulled himself out, and she kneeled before him and started sucking him again.

I suddenly felt disgusted looking at them and turned my gaze to look at him.

"Is she eating that? The white thing?" I asked, managing a small laugh as he nodded slightly. "Yes."

"Ewwww," I immediately shook my head.

We walked out of the Haveli, his hand in mine capturing my attention from the ground beneath us.

"Are you okay?"

He asked slowly, and I nervously nodded.

"Yes,"

He offered a small smile as we walked silently toward Ashwait.

"Where to, Sumanika ji?"

He inquired, rubbing his horse's neck, and I glanced down momentarily.

"Home,"

I managed to reply, causing his brows to furrow in confusion.

"Why home? The night is young, and you have the man at your mercy; think wild,"

He murmured slowly, and I felt a blush creeping onto my cheeks. My stomach had felt tense and different since I had entered the Haveli.

"Oh," I said, lowering my gaze again.

"Wherever you wish to take me,"

He smiled and stepped closer.

I instinctively stepped back. When he mentioned he wouldn’t mind if I saw another man undressed, I thought he was merely playing Prince Charming's card. But I didn’t know how to feel afterward.

Watching it together was one thing, but seeing each other after was another challenge entirely. It felt as if a string of discomfort had snapped between us.

"Are you sure?" He softy asked, and I focused on his midriff, unable to lift my gaze. As he gently brushed my chin, my lashes felt heavy, forcing my gaze to meet his.

I nodded, looking into his eyes, feeling his lips smile as he traced the back of his fingers lightly against my cheek, slowly moving to my neck.

My heart raced as he muttered,

"Soch lo, ladkio ke maamle me hamara naam vese bhi badnaam hai,"

"Think again; I have a poor reputation with girls,"

I inhaled deeply, feeling my stomach twist as I stared into his moonlit green eyes. He resembled a predator with kohl smudged along his lower eyelids, his lashes thick. Suddenly, he pulled me closer, causing my eyes to widen in shock.

"Esa kaha le jaenge aap hume jiske liye hume dobara sochna pade,"

"What kind of place would it be if I had to think twice about it?"

I managed to ask slowly, while he leaned closer, making my breath uneven.

"Esi jagah jaha ladkia jaane se darti hai,"

"A place that girls fear to go,"

He whispered slowly, and I swallowed nervously, locking eyes with him.

"What place?" I asked, gazing at his lips that curved into a broad smile. My toes ached as I hesitated to meet his gaze, and he

slowly replied,
"Sasural,"
"In-law's house,"
My brows furrowed in disbelief, and he chuckled, prompting me to push him away.
"Hum kyu darenge sasural jaane se,"
"Why would I fear going to my in-law's house?"
I queried, and he laughed lightly, wrapping his arms around my waist to assist me onto the horse.
"Hn, tum kyu darogi, tum to sasural me hi rehti ho,"
"Yeah, why would you be scared? You actually live in your in-law's house,"
He replied, then climbed behind me. I felt his arms enveloping me as he asked softly,
"Ghar chale, Suman?"
"Shall we head home, Suman?"
His voice took on a serious tone, and I nodded.
"Ji,"
I responded, and he leaned in to kiss my head while directing Ashwait to move.
The ride was brief, though the surroundings felt unfamiliar. Darkness surrounded us, and soon we approached the forest's edge, where our bonfire remained.
Confused, I watched him dismount, stepping forward to take my hand and lead me closer to the still-burning fire. I glanced at him as he added wood, asking,
"Is this home? Kunwarsa?"
He smiled faintly while kneeling near the fire to rekindle the embers, nodding.
"Yes, this is home,"
He affirmed, and I felt a nervous gulp, turning back to the small cottage, comforted by the fire's warmth.
"Who lived here?" I inquired slowly, turning back to find him seated beside me after standing up.
"Us. My brothers and I,"
He responded, and I looked up at him.
"You did not live in the Kingdom?" I asked, and he shook his head.
"No. Until I visited the Kingdom for the first time, I didn't even realize I was a Prince,"
He said, brow furrowing in thought.
"You didn't know your parents?" I asked, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, shaking his head.
"No, to me, my parents were my brothers and Maasima. I never even understood that a mother and father existed. I saw Rudra Bhaisa as my father and Ranvijay Bhaisa as my mother. They both love me, and at times I feel that I never needed parents; they provided everything. But sometimes,"
He paused, inhaling deeply.
I held his hand, swallowing silently.
"Sometimes?" I questioned slowly, and he weakly smiled.
"Sometimes, I wish I could at least meet my mother. There are no stories of being breastfed, no lullabies to sleep to, no warmth of a woman's embrace,"
He continued, and I tilted my head against his shoulder, lowering my gaze.
"And,"
He whispered, closing my eyes.
"And?" I prompted curiously.
"And the first woman I encountered in my life was my Maasima, whom I had seen sleeping with a man for money, for needs. As a child, my thoughts contrasted between a woman as a comfort provider and a woman driven by need. I used to love her, but any day, she would choose to go back to a man rather than spend time with me. Any day, she would prefer to sleep with a man over feeding me with her own hands. My brothers were there to ask if I had lunch or dinner, but there were no hands to actually feed me. Sometimes, I feel I have everything, everything a man could ask for, but nothing." His voice turned hoarse, and I silently listened to him, rubbing his hand gently.
"I started running from that emptiness with a big smile on my face and jokes on my lips. It was becoming easier to hide what I truly longed for rather than express it in words. Then, the second woman I encountered was that married princess," he said, and I inhaled sharply at her mention. I didn't know why, but I felt a heaviness in my chest as I listened to him. I bit my lips and continued to stroke my thumb gently on his hand.
"The way she used to look at me made me feel as if she was a source of comfort. I wanted to talk to her; I wanted to share what I was feeling, what I longed for, what I desired." His voice trembled, and I lifted my gaze to meet his eyes. His cheeks flushed red with the fire's glow. Tears filled his eyes, on the verge of spilling over.
"But she stripped my clothes instead of my heart. Once, twice, and it became too late to realize that this was just it. I… I

didn't know… what was hap… happening. I thought she found comfort in me, and I would find comfort in her. But as soon as we ended our physical session, she would ask me to stand outside her door again. That time, my fingers shook, but I thought maybe, in time, she would ask me in, would wrap me in her arms and ask about my life, what I was feeling—but it never came, Suman."

I felt a lump in my throat as I watched a tear roll down his cheek.

"It never came, Suman, and now I was running away from emptiness and a pang of guilt, too. Then a friend of mine asked me to join him at a place— a place that people call a brothel,"

I gasped and looked down at our joined hands. A jolt went through me as he pulled his hand away and began to speak. At that place, I encountered a woman in her middle age who assured my friend that she would groom me. I accompanied her inside, where she asked for my name and age—I fabricated my responses. She then inquired about my intentions. I did not want to do anything; I just wanted to talk. I said I wanted to talk. She smiled, looked at me, and sat beside me with tears in her eyes. She told me that I was the first man in her life to ask her to talk. I remained silent, feeling both afraid and helpless. The bubble in my heart felt huge, on the verge of bursting. But I listened to her. She shared her life story, how she was the child of a court dancer, and how her life led her into the skin business. She had five children; it was a compulsion at first, but after giving birth to them, it became a necessity to stay in that line of work. I listened to her all night and felt comforted knowing that my life wasn't the only one that was difficult. The next morning, she smiled brightly and bid me goodbye with a warm hug. I didn't know what to do. I was still young, only sixteen," he said, and I smiled weakly, listening to her him.

"Then?" I asked, and he let out a soft chuckle.

"Then, I ran again, Suman. I long for another escape, for that one moment when I could just be me, when I could truly be who I am. The hole inside me was widening; it captured my attention more than I could afford. It distracted me. And there was guilt within me, a feeling that I was betraying my brothers. I was lying to them, and I had done something I could never share with anyone. They would hate me if they knew," he said, and I blinked silently, inhaling deeply as I looked at the glowing curves of the fire warming me while the coldness hit my back, freezing my spine.

"I went to that brothel again to find that woman. I needed my time now; this time I would be talking. But instead, I met a young, beautiful woman, timid and in pain. She asked me the same question about what I needed. I didn't know what I wanted at that moment, so I asked her what she wanted. She smiled and told me how attractive she found me. She said she had never met a handsome man like me and how she had never been satisfied before." He paused, and I looked at his thumb, piercing his finger and whitening his knuckles with the strength of his grip.

I quietly reached for his hand and whispered, "You can tell me anything, Kunwarsa."

He smiled weakly and looked at me. "Call me Agastya; it will be easier for me to share," he gulped, and a tear escaped his eyes.

I gulped nervously and felt an ache in my heart, seeing the tears in his eyes.

"You can tell me anything, Agastya," I murmured slowly, and he smiled, looking down.

"I spent the night with her, and that night, I felt different. It was something more than I had ever experienced. She was the woman who looked at me with a spark in her eyes and shyness on her face. She appeared amazed, and before I could leave, she touched my feet and said she had never met a gentleman who treated her the way I did,"

I felt a pang in my chest hearing him. The mention of another woman hurt me.

"But I never met her again. She was bought by a Prince and gifted to someone," he said, and I looked at the hurt on his face.

"I never got the chance to tell her about myself. It hurt for days. I thought I could save her, protect her from the bad, from the other men, but I didn't have the courage to do that. I couldn't tell anyone about it. Then I started running away from the emptiness, guilt, and regret, all along with me," he broke down a bit, letting the tears roll down his cheeks.

I started to feel weaker, even more than before. I tried to focus on my studies and refocus my attention on what mattered. I never knew where my life was heading. I grew restless day by day. I couldn't forget everything that had happened during this time. Then, one day, my teacher asked me to gather some information for a kingdom. I felt grateful for such an opportunity. He placed his trust in me, and I began the mission," he said, and I noticed the slight smile on his face.

"I was determined to obtain information about a trade between two kingdoms. I attempted to act like a soldier and watch him closely, but he grew suspicious and dismissed me from my post. I lost the opportunity to enter the kingdom, but I learned that the king was attending a celebration and that dancers had been summoned from a well-known dance house. I visited this dance house in hopes of making some contacts, but I failed miserably as the women were reluctant to speak with a man. However, one adult woman pulled me into her room and asked what I wanted. I explained that I was seeking information. She smiled at me and said she would help, but in return, I would have to do something for her,"

I shaped my brows and asked, "What did she ask you to do?"

He lowered his gaze and looked at me.

"What would a woman ask a handsome young man to do?" he replied, and I gasped.

"Oh,"

He nodded. "She asked me for the same thing, but I wanted to stay clean; I wanted to do this without any of the dirty stuff.

She refused. I offered her money—double what I had offered before. She said she could make plenty of money dancing at the celebrations. She wanted to dominate a man for a night, just as men had dominated her. She was furious about treating a man the way she had been treated by men. I understood the pain behind her words, and I didn't have many options. I agreed. She asked me to get on my knees," He said, and my eyes widened with shock. But I said nothing.

"I did whatever she asked me to do that night. She dominated me, releasing all of her frustration with men. She pulled my hair, choked my neck, and filled my ear with cursing words. That day, I felt scared of a woman. I literally did. I had never seen such sight of a woman before. I remained silent, but it hurt me. And, in the morning, she agreed to do that for me and told me how she was kidnapped and brought here because she was beautiful. I did not know what I was doing, Suman," He said and looked at me with a tearful gaze. I did not know what to say.

"I don't want to keep you in the dark, Suman. I can't predict what part of my past might come back to me any day; I just don't want you to be sad and caught off guard by it," He said, and I smiled weakly.

"You know, after that, I accepted that I was a bad man, a bad human being. I accepted that I was good for nothing, and my life took a depressing turn from there. I did get the information for that Kingdom, but in return, I lost a part of myself, like all the time. My teacher was happy with her, and he started to ask me for information more often. I made contacts. You know, there's something strange about this world. People say it's dominated by men. They say men make the rules and own it. But surprisingly, my experience was different. I found no man who had not been in touch with a woman. And I hadn't found any woman who was not hurt by a man. I learned this and started to use it as my trick. I would be good to a woman, she would be good to me, and it would always be a win-win," he said, and I sucked on my lips.

"Did you ever hurt any woman? I mean, it would not be too difficult for a woman to fall for you," I said in a slow voice, and he shook his head.

"For the woman, I am not made for love. They knew what I was doing, and no woman would fall in love with a man like me. Never. They would enjoy me and share their stories, but they wouldn't ask about me. In all of this, I went too far and forgot why I stepped out of my home," he said, and I lowered my gaze.

"I forgot what I wanted; I forgot that I left my home to talk, to tell someone how empty I was feeling. My charm, smile, and jokes masked it all for me. No one would ever guess that I could feel this emptiness. They always saw me as joyful, lovely, and someone delightful to spend time with," he said, and I blinked silently.

"And with all the emptiness, guilt, and regrets, I never found the courage to tell any woman that I liked her or that I had feelings for her. I was too afraid of rejection and being laughed at. For instance, I once told a girl that I enjoyed spending time with her, and she laughed at me. She mocked me and said she was having fun with me too. Since then, emotional connections became something I felt I would never have in my life. I lost hope for that. Then, one time, when I gathered all my courage to tell this beautiful princess that I liked her, she called me a manwhore. Honestly, I am," he said, sighing deeply.

"I'm a manwhore, Suman," he said. I gulped silently and gazed at the fire. Honestly, I didn't know what to say. I felt bad, and there was something else I felt. I never expected his past to be like this.

"I am not a good man, Suman. I am not like my brothers, who saved themselves for their wives. I am a spoiled man. By the time I realized I was a spoiled man, it was too late. I cannot erase what I have done. I did all of this consciously, and I cannot express my disdain for them in kind words because it is what it is. In all of this, I have lost a part of myself to them, Suman. I can never be whole again. My thoughts are always scattered, and I carry so much within me that I can never be empty again," he said, and I saw fresh tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I lost all hope of finding that one person who would ask me what I had within me until I met this woman who needed saving. After spending my early adulthood with many different women, I developed a soft spot for them. Their stories shaped me. Any day, I would choose to save a woman over my happiness. That's why when I read the letter for you, I couldn't stop myself from searching for you," he said, and I inhaled sharply, silently. Tears began to blur my vision.

"I couldn't stop myself from fighting for you. I wanted to protect you, save you, and bring you back home. But I had to pretend to marry you to keep you safe. Trust me, I've never done anything like that for any woman before. I didn't feel anything while I did it; it was purely for your safety. I knew I was protecting you, just another woman under the rule of a male-dominated society. But the moment we entered this cottage, in the home of my childhood, I felt like I finally had a chance to tell someone about myself," he said, and I bit my lower lip, trying not to cry.

"But the way you preached about loyalty made me realize that I'm not meant for you. I understand what you've been through, and I know how hard it is for you to trust someone—a man—again. I know it's difficult for you to be with someone like me, and I completely get that. I see it's tough for you to trust a man like me again. I understand… I totally understand. And the way you look at me, Suman, I see a hope in your eyes that I've never seen in any woman before. Honestly, it scares me. It reminds me of my past and makes me aware that I'm not a good man—not for any woman and especially not for you. It puts me on edge, Suman. I'm afraid of hurting you. I don't want to, and I knew I couldn't keep you in the dark," he said, looking at me.

"Suman," he called, and I blinked silently before turning to face him. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Suman, I cannot hide from you. I have killed people, and I have slept with women for information, sympathy, and even pleasure. I am not the good man you think I am. I play with words; I am clever, and I make people do what I want. I am too bad

for you. I do not expect you to love me; I cannot. I do not deserve that after everything I have done in my life. I am not a good man, and I know you cannot trust someone like me. I understand it's difficult for you. Being with me will always make you feel scared; you will feel suspicious of me cheating on you, hiding from you, or something like that. It's understandable. You truly deserve better, Suman. I'm telling you this now because I find myself at that point in life again where I am seeking an escape, running from everything to find someone to hold on to. One more day with you will break my guard, and I will never be able to come back from that."

He lowered his gaze and inhaled deeply.

"I'm falling for you, Suman," he said, and I let more tears stream down my face.

"And I don't have very decent intentions for you, either. I want to be with you through thick and thin. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. But," he said, and I looked up at him. "But?"

He gulped. "But if we were together, there wouldn't be any space for doubts, suspicions, or escape. You will be my everything, and I will be your everything," he said, and I lowered my gaze.

"And there will be no one between us. Not your deceased husband, not the women I've met, and not even this world. I will be there for you, and you will be there for me. I want to explore everything with you, and you can do the same. There will be no titles between us. I won't be the Prince, and you won't be the maid. We will just be two individuals, two souls," he said, and I felt his hand on mine.

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Suman. But you don't have to say anything right now," he shook his head.

"Take your time. If you want to leave, I'm not stopping you. You'll find someone much better than me. Even Bhan Singh is a good guy. I've heard things about him. He's someone I've never met before," he chuckled.

"I'm not lying, Suman. I'm a bad man; you don't have to be with me. You earn for yourself; you're on your own. You don't need me or any man if you don't want to. Because of that incident, you don't have to be with me. You have the freedom to decide, and I'm not in any hurry. You can tell me whenever you want. You don't have to be with me if you don't want to," he said, and I lowered my gaze from him. I didn't know what to say. It felt like too much all of a sudden. I let the fresh tears roll down my cheeks, and I couldn't stop myself from speaking.

"I want to go home,"

I pulled my hand away from his. "I want to go home, Kunwarsa," I said as I stood up and wiped my tears. His voice turned hoarse. "Oh, okay," he replied, and I watched him wipe his own tears before walking toward Ashwait. My heart felt like it was caught in a storm—a storm of life, a storm of pain and love.

He helped me onto the horse and climbed in behind me. The ride back to the kingdom was silent, and when I stepped down from the horse, I turned to go back to my chamber. But he held my hand and stopped me. I tried not to cry as I looked into his red eyes.

"Are you okay, Suman?" he asked slowly. He licked his lips, and I gulped silently, feeling broken inside.

"I need time, Kunwarsa," I said softly. He nodded and let go of my hand. I didn't know why, but hearing that from him felt more brutal. I always knew he had a past filled with women. It was something I couldn't say I hadn't expected. I anticipated it from him, but it hurt even more to know.

I returned to my room and sat on the mattress, pulling my knees to my chest as I cried. It hurt—it was painful. I felt betrayed. I didn't understand why. My heart felt heavy as fresh tears rolled down my cheeks. There was a strange weight on my chest, something I couldn't shake off.

Why did he have to tell me all of this? I wished he hadn't. I could understand what he had gone through because I had spent my life running from one thing to another, losing hope in people. But why did he have to tell me in this way? When he mentioned that he had lost parts of himself in the past and that they would never return, it sliced through my heart. I didn't know what to do next.

I closed my eyes and burst into silent tears, unsure of why I was crying. I laid back and hid under the comforter, his words circling in my mind. I knew I wouldn't be his first or second, but I didn't want to know that. I didn't know how to face him. We weren't in love, so why did it hurt so much? My heart broke even more when I learned my husband had slept with another woman.

Kunwarsa hadn't cheated on me; he hadn't even looked at another woman since me and had shared everything about his past, yet it still hurt. Something was happening inside me; it felt as if history would repeat itself, like another, even more brutal pain was waiting for me. I didn't know how to trust him. What if he slept with another woman again for information? What if he fell in love with someone else and returned to a brothel

What if I couldn't please him like I couldn't please my husband?

I shook my head and wiped away my tears. A headache started to form, so I closed my eyes, trying to calm myself.

I didn't know what to do.

I wasn't sure when I fell asleep.

I woke up to the sounds of daily chaos and the tinkling anklet bells of attendees rushing through the galleries.

My eyes flew open, and I quickly ran to take a bath and freshen up. I was already late.

I hurriedly bathed, changed into a regular outfit, and headed to Nandani's chamber. The sun was shining directly overhead, and my head throbbed.

The conversation we'd had last night kept replaying in my mind.

I entered Nandani's chamber and saw her sitting with Ranaji on the couch. She noticed me and turned back.

"Pranam, Ranaji and Ranisa," I said, placing my hands together, and she smiled at me.

"How are you?"

She asked, and I gulped silently, nodding as I tried to respond.

"I'm good," I finally said.

I watched them having lunch as she continued, "The sunlight is nice today. I'm planning to give Rudraja a bath. Can you give her an oil massage? She's outside with her Kaakusa."

My brows furrowed slightly, but I nodded.

"Okay," I replied.

I walked away and asked an attendee to bring me the baby massage oil before heading to the meeting area where the baby was enjoying her sunbath.

I saw the princess lying on the carpet, wrapped in her baby comforter and velvet outfit, with Kunwar Agastya hovering over her and talking to her

"Aoooouuuuuhhhhhhhhhh, my baby," I heard him exclaim, and the princess squealed, reaching for his face.

Lowering my gaze, I walked towards him silently, and suddenly he lifted his gaze, noticing me, and murmured,

"Kaisi ho?"

"How are you?"

His gaze softened as he looked at me. I knelt to place the massage oil beside him, trying not to meet his eyes.

"Good," I replied softly, remaining silent.

There was a slight uneasiness between us, and I couldn't understand why I felt different. Why did I feel trapped?

I had happily lived the last seven years without a man, and suddenly this man was making me feel everything I had feared feeling.

"Nandani asked me to massage the princess," I murmured, and he inhaled deeply, shifting a little away from her.

"Oh, okay," he said.

I silently gulped as I looked at the princess, who smiled at me.

"Enjoying your sunbath, Princess?" I said softly, leaning in to caress her cheek. She smiled and turned to look at Kunwarsa, squealing again.

She wanted him there.

"I should probably go," he said, and I didn't know what I wanted.

"It's okay, you can stay," I managed to say slowly and lifted my gaze to look at him. My heart sank deeper as I noticed his slightly swollen eyes and washed-out face. It seemed as if he hadn't slept well the night before, and the vision of last night appeared before me. Everything he told me flooded my mind, and I lowered my gaze to the princess.

"The princess is enjoying your company," I added, and he looked down at her. He was lying on his chest, resting his face on his elbows, his chin on his fist.

"Hey, my sweet baby," he smiled, looking at the princess, and she laughed a little. A smile appeared on my face, and I looked at him; as he feathered her cheek, she closed her eyes and looked sleepy.

"Don't make her fall asleep," I said, and he glanced at me with furrowed brows.

"Why?" I looked at the princess and began pulling the comforter down to her waist and untying her little clothes.

"Because she won't sleep after her bath. She needs to rest after taking a bath," I explained, and the princess smiled at me.

"Ohh," he muttered, and I noticed his finger helping me untie her clothes as he asked in a slow voice, "Suman, are you okay?"

I lowered my gaze at the change in his tone and tried to reassure him, "Don't worry, I'll be okay." He lifted his gaze and looked at me.

"Do you hate me?" he asked slowly, and I didn't know what to say. Suddenly, I felt as if I couldn't love him. I felt a little disgusted. I knew he had saved me, but there was something that happened between us last night that I couldn't comprehend. Though I didn't hate him.

"No, I don't," I managed to say slowly. I collected oil in my palm and rubbed my hands together to warm it before gently pressing them against the princess's chest.

"What are you thinking? Suman," he asked in a low, pleading voice, and I shook my head.

"I don't know, Kunwarsa," I replied, starting to massage the princess. She turned silent and began to feel my hands on her.

"Are you upset?" he asked, and I lifted my gaze to him as I asked, "Why are you worried? Don't you have anything else to do?"

He lowered his gaze and nodded. "I'm sorry. I really am. I didn't know what I was doing, Suman. I just wanted some love

and affection," he said, and I began to massage the princess's hand.

"So, did you get any?" I asked, and he shook his head.

"Please, Suman, I'm sorry. You know I've changed. I won't hurt you," he said, and I gulped silently and shook my head.

"I don't know, Kunwarsa. It feels like something is missing," I said, and suddenly he held my wrist, making me look at him.

"What is missing? Suman," he asked with a pleading tone, and I shook my head.

"I don't know. I don't see you as any different from my late husband, Kunwarsa," I couldn't help but say, and he fell silent. He gritted his teeth and lowered his gaze, releasing my wrist.

"Oh."

"You both went to brothels, slept with women, and I could handle anything but that," I said, biting my lip, trying not to break into tears.

"It feels like a trap, Kunwarsa. Since the day my husband left me, I've been running from men. I'm running from feelings, emotions, and relationships. After him, I didn't have the courage to look into any man's eyes. I felt restless if any man came near me. I don't know. And after realizing there's no difference between you and him, I can't do this. I can't go through that pain again. I can't accept it," I tried to explain, my eyes welling with tears.

"I mean, I'm not anyone special to you. You saved me, and we both got drawn to each other, but I don't know; after finding all this out about you, I can't see you as my husband. I feel it would hurt me. I don't know how to trust you or accept what's happening right now," I inhaled deeply, trying to regain my composure, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

"I'm scared, Kunwarsa. I won't be able to handle that again. And I can't see you in pain either. It would hurt you too if I can't trust you. It would hurt you too if I looked at you with suspicion. I know you aren't the same person anymore, but I just can't; I won't be able to handle it, especially after knowing that…" I lowered my gaze and bit my trembling lip.

"It's okay," I heard his hoarse voice, breaking my heart. "It's okay. I understand." he inhaled deeply. "I know it's difficult, and I mean, I understand it's totally fine with me. You… you deserve to be happy; you don't need me, I mean…" He sighed deeply, lowering his gaze.

"You're right. You're right. You… deserve someone good… and… and, I think… I think I should go," he suddenly said and walked away.

My heart ached even more as I broke into silent sobs, watching him walk away like that. I didn't understand what was happening to me.

But I knew my heart wasn't in a healthy place. I didn't know what I wanted or how I was feeling. It was causing me pain.

I inhaled deeply and glanced at Princess, who was silently looking in his direction. She wore a sad expression and suddenly started to cry.

"Uuuwwwwwwaaeeeeeeeeeeeeee, aaaeeeeeeeehuuuuuuu,"

I closed my eyes, and suddenly, Nandani's voice caught my attention. "Suman,"

And I turned to look at her.

I walked away from there, my heart feeling heavy and empty yet again. I lowered my face, trying to hide the tears welling in my eyes, threatening to break free at any moment.

"Agastya," suddenly, Ranvijay Bhaisa's voice caught my attention, and I kept my eyes wide open to let the air dry my tears.

"Ji, Bhaisa," I said in a confident and cheerful voice and waited for him to approach me.

As he touched my shoulder, I gulped to swallow the lump forming in my throat. "What happened? Is everything okay?" he asked.

His voice was slow, and I looked into his concerned eyes. I immediately planted a broad smile on my face.

"What would happen to me? God sends me messages to make something happen in this world," I said, and he laughed, looking at me.

I laughed, too.

"So, how is everything going?" he asked as we walked towards the garden. I nodded.

"Everything is going great. King Abhinandan has left and started moving his troops to Pratapgarh as we discussed, and I will leave soon, too," I said, looking at him, and he nodded.

"And what about Rashmika? Did you talk to her?" he asked, and I narrowed my brows, realizing that amid all this, I had completely forgotten about her.

"Um, I was just going to talk to her," I said and inhaled sharply.

"Is everything good between you two? I mean, I haven't seen the two of you talking, and she is here, but you went somewhere last night. Are you considering breaking this alliance? Mehrangarh could be wrong, but she is a princess and deserves a life. Please don't do anything that will hurt her. I understand the Kingdom deserves punishment, but she does not," he said, and I gulped silently, unsure of how to respond.

"Ji, ji, bhaisa," I managed to reply, and he smiled at me.

"All good, right, Agastya? I don't know, but you look upset and sad," he asked again, touching my cheek.

I smiled widely. "Yes, Bhaisa. I just need some sleep," I said, and he nodded and stepped away from me.

"Alright, I should go and will send you the list of resources we have for this war," he added, and I nodded, taking a few steps back.

"Okay, Bhaisa," I inhaled deeply and returned to my chamber. My head was hurting badly. I pressed my hands on my temples and sat down on the bed.

Then, I couldn't help but burst into tears.

I did not want to hurt her. That's why I wasn't telling her anything. I knew she had issues trusting a man like me. I knew she would become upset and doubt me.

But how could I hide all this from her? She deserved to know. But I didn't want to hurt her like this.

She cried because of me. I couldn't bear to see her cry. I could die but couldn't bear to see her tears.

What was the use of saving her if I ended up crying?

I didn't know what to do now. She didn't want to see me; she didn't trust me, and I knew she would never do so now. Everything was going well, and I didn't understand why I told her everything.

But how could I hide it from her? How could I let her fall for a man like me? I didn't deserve her. I mean, she was a woman who sacrificed and remained single until her husband died. The husband who cheated on her and left her alone. Still, she stayed single and didn't let any other man see her.

And then there was me.

What the hell had I done with my life? I didn't know what would happen now. I wanted her, loved her, and told her what I was feeling. I tried to talk to her; I needed to make her happy.

I knew I made mistakes, and there were no excuses for them. When I could have been a person with greater control, I let my emotions and emptiness overwhelm me. All the while, I knew I was falling, and I knew I was ruining my life, but I still went ahead with it.

But I couldn't ruin her life. I couldn't make her uncomfortable or doubt her emotions and life. I couldn't make her fall in love with someone like me and suffer because of it.

I knew I was just teasing her at first. But I was feeling attracted. I craved her attention.

I didn't know she was different. But the night she entered my chamber and sat silently in front of me, I realized she was another woman.

She was the one who wasn't seeing me as a spoiled, womanizing prince but something more.

But it all went in vain, and I understood this when she brought up my visit to the brothel and my appearances in our kingdom. That day, I began to realize she wasn't intentionally bringing it up but was affected by it all.

And somewhere, she didn't trust me. She didn't like it. And there was no point in any relationship if she couldn't trust me, and she wouldn't be happy, constantly doubting me.

She didn't need me for anything. She was working, had responsibilities, and everything she wanted. So why would she

choose to be with me? Just because of an incident?

And no one knew about it.

But I needed her. I craved her. I wanted her to hug me and tell me she understood, that she would trust me, and that she knew I would never do this again. It hurt when she said she couldn't do it. I knew she didn't have to, but why couldn't she? I was falling for her. I wanted her to be my wife and spend her life with me. I would do everything for her; I would keep her happy. But that would be coercive if she didn't feel anything for me, wouldn't it?

"Kunwarsa," suddenly the voice of an attendee caught my attention, and I wiped the tears from my face and looked at her.

She walked closer and said, "Your lunch, Kunwarsa."

I inhaled deeply and muttered, "I'm not hungry. Take it back."

She blinked nervously and replied, "But what will I say if Ranisa asks me?"

"Tell her that I had lunch, simple. Now go," I said as I watched her hand back the lunch.

I felt bad.

But I couldn't stay here like this. It was another heartbreak. I should respect her decision to choose for herself, and she made a good choice. I shouldn't be selfish.

I inhaled deeply and stood up from the bed to walk to the workout area. I took off my kurta and started exercising to take my mind off her.

I had to forget her sometimes, just as she would do. I needed to focus on the war; it was important.

I began with push-ups, counting loudly to keep my mind on the numbers, not her.

"One," I exclaimed as I started.

I tried to concentrate and continue counting, but without realizing it, my mind drifted back to her. I recalled how she cried silently and asked to leave, and how she said she couldn't trust me.

My body heated up, and I kept doing the push-ups. But nothing was happening. I kept thinking about her even more—the moments I spent with her, my dagger, our kisses. I knew that if I kissed her, it would be game over. Why the hell didn't I stop myself?

But she was beautiful—the most beautiful person inside and out. She used to look at me with timidity and slight frustration, with fear and right on me, like she owned me.

Amid all the thoughts, I did not realize that I had counted more than five hundred. I lay down on the sand in the sunlight, tired and sweating.

And one thing was certain: I wanted only her. No one else. Her comforting scent had clouded my mind; her eyes had ruined all other eyes for me. Her moans were the best, and I craved more. I needed her.

I let out a deep sigh and cradled my face in my hands.

"I fucking love you so much, Suman. You need to understand that," I whispered in frustration, gritting my teeth.

I could not accept her 'No' like this. She needed to get me, and she needed to love me back.

I would make her fall for me.

I sighed and lay tired in the mud, letting the sun dry my tears and remove the negativity.

But first, I needed to consider how to get her to come to me. She did care for me. If I cried, she would hug me; if I was hungry, she would come to feed me.

I suddenly smiled. Yes, I would only eat once she came to me with the food.

She didn't know me yet. I was recognized for my stubbornness. And I needed her.

I got up from there and headed into the bathroom to enjoy a long, leisurely bath, reflecting more on my plan.

And suddenly, another idea came to my mind.

It was almost evening, and she would be in the kitchen. I took my dagger and took out the blade and gave myself a fine cut on my palm, making me bleed.

And then I called an attendee.

"Ahhhh, I cut my hand. Can you bring me some fresh water?" I asked her, and she immediately walked out. She went into the kitchen, where Suman would ask her what happened. She would tell Suman I cut my hand, and Suman would come running. Mastermind. Oh! She would be here in a few moments moments.

One," I smiled and dipped my bleeding hand into the pool to turn the water red, adding a bit more danger. "Two," I counted and tried to make my face look pained. "Three," I struggled to hold back my smile. "Four," I cleared my throat to make my voice sound hurt. "Fiv-,"

"What happened?" Before I could finish, I looked up at her standing before me—panting and worried. "What happened to your hand? Are you out of your mind? What the hell were you doing?" she yelled, stepping closer with a concerned expression.

I pouted. "I'm sorry. I was just… playing with my dagger and accidentally got cut. I didn't mean to disturb you."

"What are you, five? Who in the world plays with a dagger?" she whispered, still yelling, as I stared at her worried face. Her angelic eyes, now brimming with tears, were fixed on me while she sat on the thick edge of the pool, holding my hand.

"I'm sorry. I won't do that again," I said, furrowing my brow. The pain was visible to her, and she looked at me with

concern.

“Can’t you take care of yourself? And why did you send the lunch back?” she asked, her voice slow and angry, as I glanced at a few attendees standing by the bathroom door.

I signaled them silently to leave and turned back to her.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t feeling hungry,” I said, and she took a deep breath.

“Why? Why weren’t you feeling hungry? What happened?” she asked slowly, and I gulped in silence.

“Nothing, I just don’t want to eat. But you didn’t have to worry about me. I mean, you don’t have anything for me. Why did you come running to me?” I asked slowly, and she gritted her teeth.

“Of course. But I’m an attendee, and it’s my responsibility to take care of you,” she said, trying to hide her smile.

“As an attendee, your responsibility is to care for Bhabhisa, not me, half-wife,” I said, and she looked up at me.

“Don’t call me that,” she said, narrowing her brows. “What?” I replied.

"That, half-wife," she replied, and I shook my head slowly, questioning her.

"Why? You are still and will always be my half-wife," I said in a slow voice, and she took a deep breath.

"You know I cannot do that. We talked about it," she said slowly, wrapping the bandage around my hand.

"But I want you, and I need you," I said, resting my head in my lap. She flinched at my touch and tried to push my head away.

"Someone will see, Kunwarsa. You can’t do that," she said, and I closed my eyes.

"Just for a few moments. My head hurts badly. I can’t ask any other woman to do this. You can do it, right?" I pleaded slowly, and she eventually gave in.

"Alright, but just for a few moments," she added, and I nodded with a smile.

"Yes, thank you," I said as I felt her fingers gently slide into my hair. I closed my eyes and enjoyed her hand on my head, massaging it softly.

She remained silent, and I said nothing either. She kept running her fingers through my hair, and I felt relief.

I needed nothing more than this if she wasn’t ready.

I was happy for us to be this way. It was like she was there for me, and I was there for her, something stronger than marital commitments.

"Kunwarsa," she suddenly spoke in a slow voice, and I hummed, "Hnnn?"

I swallowed quietly, letting the warmth of her presence soothe me, easing my pain.

"What if that incident hadn’t happened?" she asked slowly, and I opened my eyes.

"What do you mean?" I questioned.

"I mean, what if you saved another woman, not me? Would you fall for her? Would you expect her to accept you as a husband? Would you want to spend your life with her too?" she asked, and I bit my lip, moving my head from her lap and straightening up.

"I mean, what if you saved another woman, not me? Would you fall for her? Would you expect her to accept you, too, as a husband? Would you want to spend your life too?" My voice came out slowly as I asked him. My heart was heavy at that moment, but it was better than before. The silence between us felt soothing, and I stared at his face silently.

"Maybe," He replied, and I looked at my fingers moving in his curly hair. He closed his eyes and muttered in a slow voice.

"I understand you, Suman. I know what you are feeling, and you did not hurt me," he said in a slow voice. I inhaled deeply, suddenly feeling a weighted pang in my chest.

I lowered my gaze, and I sucked on my lips before asking. "What happens now?"

He inhaled sharply, adjusted his head into my lap, and muttered slowly. "Nothing, just be yourself and happy," He said, and I smiled a little. I did not know, but it felt peaceful suddenly after the storm of chaos, and I tried to ask in a slow voice. "But, I hurt you,"

He shook his head, smiled, lifted his gaze a little at me, and said. ***"Bass ek tum hi to ho jo dard bhi degi to dawa jesa lagega. Fir dukh kesa?"*** "You are the only one who even gives me the pain; it will feel like medicine. Then, what sorrow?" His words made me feel different, and I could not help but lower my hand to his cheeks and feather it gently. ***"Hum aapse nafrat nahi karte,"*** "I do not hate you,"

He smiled widely and nodded. ***"Kar bhi nahi paogi,"*** "You will not be able to either,"

Suddenly, he inhaled deeply and looked up at me. “But do not sympathize with me. I don’t need that,” he added, and I gulped silently, unable to say anything.

He closed his eyes, and I continued to massage his head gently. I felt uneasy about everything. It wasn’t just what he said, but something deeper. I sensed I had seen this coming before, even if I didn’t understand how.

I mean, the way he got upset at first and tried to push me away, I knew something dark about him.

But he was unlike other men. He was there for me, not just to rescue me but also afterward when I needed him.

I visited his chamber the other day, and he said nothing. He understood that I just needed some silence and his presence. I didn’t realize it then, but I know I was hurt because of him, and right now, he is the only one making me feel good.

After that incident, he had become my comfort. Nothing could go wrong when I was with him.

“Tell me, Suman,” he blurted in a slow voice, and I blinked nervously before asking. "What?"

He held my hand, which was bandaged, and kissed my fingers before saying, “Everything that is bothering you.” His voice became deeper and more peaceful this time, and I smiled.

“I don’t know, Kunwarsa,” I started, clasping his fingers in my hand as I continued.

“I’m feeling terrified,” I mumbled.

He smiled and replied, “That’s okay. It’s not something you hear every day.”

I bit my lips and shifted his head off my lap; he raised his gaze to meet mine, filled with confusion and pain.

I clenched my hands tightly on my skirt and lifted my feet to step into the pool. His expression shifted from confusion to shock.

His eyes widened as I let the water soak my skirt. I lowered myself to sit beside him.

He gazed into my eyes while I pressed my back against the pool wall, pulled my knees close to my chest, and took a deep breath to steady my racing heart.

I gulped nervously and rested my head on his shoulder, saying, “My head hurts too.”

I felt his body relax under my touch as he tilted his head against mine. I looked at him, intertwining our hands before closing my eyes.

Finally, it felt peaceful and comforting.

Sitting beside him, I exhaled deeply and tried to concentrate on my breathing. The water temperature dropped from high to low, and the oil in the lamps burned against the emptiness to brighten the world. But sadly, when night arrived, no light could bring the brightness back.

“Maybe I should have hidden that from you. I can’t stand seeing you in pain,” he muttered slowly. I opened my eyes and looked at our hands. The skin was turning pale from the cold water, freezing us slowly, and I bit my lips, preparing to speak. “Maybe, but hearing it from someone else would have hurt me even more,” my voice came out slowly. He responded, “No one can come between us, Suman, if you accept me as your husband.” Hearing his low, hoarse voice, I lowered my gaze and shook my head.

"What if I am not enough for you," I asked in a slow voice, and he chuckled suddenly.

"Pagal ho tum?" "Are you mad?"

I thinned my brows with confusion and turned to look at him a little.

"Jo bhi ho, jitni bhi ho, ab tum hi ho, Maang to bhar di hai na. Vikalp nahi hai hamare pass," "You are the only one now. However you are, whatever it may be, I do not have options," He said in a slow voice, and I tried to ask in a slow voice. "What if you had options?"

He lowered his gaze, kissed the back of my hands, and muttered.

"Pata hai, bahut himmat lagti hai jab aap apne jeevan ka vo bhaag kisi ko batate ho jisse aap khud kabhi nahi yaad karna chahte, jisse aap har roz door bhaagte ho or bachna chahte ho. Tumhari Kasam, Suman, dobara kisi ko nahi bata paenge, itni himmat nahi hai. Or ab to ye ummeed bhi nahi hai ki koi samjhe kyuki samajhne layak nahi rahe hum ab,"

“You know, it takes a lot of courage to share that part of life you can’t remember, the part you run away from every day. I swear, Suman, I will never have the strength to tell anyone this again; I just don’t have the courage left. And I’ve accepted that no one would understand because it doesn’t even provide anything worth understanding.” His words made my heart heavy, and I lowered my gaze in silence, unable to respond.

“Then why did you tell me?” But I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

He inhaled deeply and brushed my hand with his thumb while saying. ***"Patni ho, hak or jaruri bhi hai tumhara jaanna ka,"*** "You are my wife; it's your right and the necessity to know,"

I did not know, but it brought a slight smile, and I turned to look at him. "I have not accepted you yet,"

He smiled weakly.

"And you are so unpredictable and confusing," I added, furrowing my brows, and he asked.

"How?"

"One moment you say you can leave me, and the next, you call me your wife," I said, and he sucked on his lips and replied slowly.

“For me to call you my wife is my reality, and you have the right to make your own choices; your life is your right. No one can stop you from saying you don’t want to see me, or that you want to forget me, or that you wish to live alone or marry someone else. That’s your right, but I am not backing out of my responsibilities or my feelings,” His words resonated with me, and I didn’t know why, but hearing him made me feel lighter. It was as if he was lifting some weight off my chest, and I tried to ask. "So, what happens if I marry someone else?"

He furrowed his brows and raised his face to look at me with questioning eyes. “Are you having an affair?” I quickly shook my head, my eyes widening in shock as I tried to say, “Are you crazy? No!” He leaned in closer. “Just joking. I’ll be happy for you,” he said in a slow voice, suddenly raising his pitch.

“But that man has to keep you happy. I mean, there’s no way he would ask you to cook after having sex and make you cry,” he said, and I chuckled.

"You cannot keep eyes on him,"

He shook his head. “That’s where you are mistaken, Sumanika Ji. I can definitely keep an eye on him and take him out for hurting you, too.” He turned his gaze toward me, and I felt a shiver go down my spine when he mentioned killing my hypothetical husband.

"You need some treatment. I am not even married to someone else yet, and you are already killing him," I said and lowered my gaze. He leaned in closer and kissed my forehead.

“Just be happy. I don’t want anything else. I don’t need answers; I don’t want you to be with me if it makes you unhappy or makes you doubt yourself. No promises, no heartbreaks,” he said, and I gulped silently, leaning into his shoulder and muttering.

“I feel comfortable with you. I don’t know why. No man has ever made me feel this way. I can’t let go of this comfort,” I managed to say slowly, and it took a lot of courage to put that into words.

"I’m happy to be that," he said, and I lowered my gaze.

"You know, when you’re upset, the world can tell," I said slowly, and he chuckled.

"Trust me, when I’m upset, no one can tell," he said in a slow voice, and I lifted my gaze to meet his. He looked back at me; those green eyes made my heart race effortlessly.

"Why didn’t you tell your brothers about all of this?" I managed to ask slowly, and he shook his head while responding.

"It was not, is not, and will never be something I am proud of. So, it's not worth sharing. What happened has happened. Talking about it won’t make it undone or wash it away. It will just hurt them and bring me back to the place from which I was running away." His voice was low, and I couldn’t help but smile weakly while nodding.

"I can relate to that. I can’t share everything about my failures either; I mean, I can’t talk about my deceased husband and the life I went through with everyone because, honestly, even mentioning it hurts," I replied slowly, and he smiled.

"No, talking about it with the right person will never hurt. Someone you trust to understand and just be with you. Like, Bhabhisa," he said, and I felt a pang in my chest for some reason, lowering my gaze as I remembered how he was there for me when I needed him.

"Like you, Kunwar Agastya," I muttered, lifting my gaze to meet his.

Suddenly, he leaned closer, and my heart raced while my breathing quickened. My lips quivered, but he stopped just an inch away. My flickering gaze dropped to his soft, full lips, flickering between his eyes and mine.

"I’m not making any commitments, Kunwarsa," I whispered slowly, and he shook his head.

"I don’t need commitments."

I gulped nervously and managed to ask, "What would this mean?"

He gulped silently and looked into my eyes.

"Anything you want it to mean."

I clenched my hands tightly and closed my eyes slightly in fear.

I waited, feeling the air rising to greet his lips on mine, but I felt those soft, dark pink petals against my nose.

I calmed down instantly and loosened my grip while opening my eyes to see him.

"You should go now," he said, and I didn't understand why it tightened my chest.

"Okay," I muttered, his hand slipping away from mine. An ache bubbled within me, a longing to forget everything and hold him tightly for both our sakes. I felt a heaviness inside me; I wanted to kiss him then and tell him I was scared, but I still wanted to be with him.

However, the fear of being hurt again won out, and I silently stood up to leave.

As I took a few steps away, letting water drop off my clothes, he suddenly called, "Suman."

I turned back immediately to look at him.

"Ji?"

"A shawl will be there; take it; it must be windy, or you'll catch cold," he said, and I nodded.

She left, and I didn't understand why I felt so bad. This realization was forming in my heart—that I shouldn't force her to come to me. I shouldn't have harmed myself to come here and see me. If she kept seeing and talking to me, she would fall for me even more without even realizing it.

I rubbed my face and sighed with frustration.

This was the perfect example of a fucked up life. You have a wife, but you don't have a wife. You love someone, but you can't tell her.

She was right—there was no doubt about it. But I didn't know I would fall in love after what happened in my past. After sleeping with that married princess, I was sure I wouldn't find love, so I didn't feel compelled to be better.

What I unconsciously manifested lights and became my reality. I didn't realize that my fear had turned into darkness, but I felt I should stay away from her.

My presence wouldn't offer her any comfort, only trauma. I also didn't want a sympathetic relationship.

I knew I'd just saved her and put the vermilion in her hair to protect her. That didn't mean she had to be with me.

Oh God!

Please, make me forget everything; I'm begging you.

I took a deep breath, finished my bath, and changed into fresh clothes. I had already hurt her enough; I should have let her be happy and left her alone to live her life. She didn't need me, and she had made no commitments.

I couldn't keep her against my will. I had to move on, for both our sakes.

I returned to my bedroom and gathered some papers and an inkpot to lay out the plan for Mehrangarh.

Stepping into the reading room, I spread the map of Mehrangarh wide on the table.

I stared blankly at it, unable to comprehend how we could lead the war and disrupt the invaders' plan without harming anyone. They would cross the river and approach Mehrangarh, where their cannons awaited them. We had to contend with three challenges: the cannons, the enemy soldiers, and the uninvited problem.

I sighed deeply and leaned over the table to gaze at the image of the mountains, while the vision of the empty underground water channel blurred my thoughts.

However, my mind seemed too preoccupied with Suman.

I shook my head. She didn't need me. I reminded myself that I had to focus on the war. I couldn't jeopardize everyone's lives just because I felt hurt.

I didn't know, but she said she wouldn't judge me. I understood her pain; no wife would want her husband's past to be like that. Yet, our marriage didn't unfold in wonderful ways. It wasn't even a complete marriage.

"Agastya,"

A sudden, girlish voice caught my attention, causing me to furrow my brows in confusion. At that moment, my mind recognized it immediately.

Rashmika.

I immediately rolled the map, hearing the anklet bells. Panicking, I hurried out of the reading room and stood in front of her.

"Hey," I said, and she knitted her brows in confusion.

“Why are you panting?” she asked, and I narrowed my brows, trying to act normal.

"Oh, I was just masturbating," I chuckled, and she rolled her eyes and slapped my chest before turning away and sitting on the couch.

"What happened?" I asked, walking and taking a seat beside her.

"Everything is falling apart, Agastya," she unfolded.

"What happened? Is everything okay?" I dared, and she suddenly burst into tears. “I don’t know. It’s getting complicated, and I feel hurt,” she sobbed, covering her face.

I gritted my teeth, wrapping my arms around her shoulder. "Did you two fight about something?"

She hiccuped and nodded.

"About what?"

She lifted her tearful gaze and looked at me. “I told her everything about our plan regarding life, and she said she doesn’t trust me. I don’t know what to do. She keeps asking me why I’m getting married to you, and she isn’t even trying to understand.”

I sighed deeply, asking, "What did you tell her about us?"

She washed her cheeks, sobbing. “I told her we have nothing romantic between us. I’m marrying you to be closer to her. But she asked how she would know you wouldn’t touch me. She said we could both fool her. I mean, why on earth would I fool her? She can’t see what I’m doing to stay close to her. All she cares about is herself,” she whispered through her tears, and I couldn’t help but rub her arm gently.

“Hey, she will understand. She’s different; she can’t grasp what you’re experiencing. The pressure from your family, your father, and brothers. She needs to trust you,” I said, and she shook her head.

“Yes, that’s what I was telling her. I told her to trust me because that’s the only way I could stay here in this Kingdom, and I didn’t know how to express just how much I loved her. She’s starting to doubt me. Tell me, what other option do I really have? Will my parents ever let me stay in Suryagarh without getting married? Or will they allow me to remain in Mehrangarh without tying the knot? You know how these men are. No one would understand if I married someone else. You got me; you understood what I was going through and agreed to this wedding to help me, even knowing we wouldn’t have anything between us. But she thinks I will forget her once I’m married. I don’t know, Agastya. Sometimes, it feels like no matter how much you do for someone, it’s never enough,” she said, and I didn’t know what to say. Well, being a girl, she had feelings for another girl and couldn’t tell anyone about it. As good friends, she confided in me, and that’s where we found ourselves. At first, she tried to act childish in front of her parents to hide her disinterest in the marriage.

But they were determined to marry her off to some random man without a second thought. She feared she would be forced and hurt by a man, as no one would understand her.

And since I needed to enter Mehrangarh and couldn’t bear to see her sad, I agreed to marry her for convenience.

If she married me, she would come to Suryagarh and enjoy her life with her loved one.

“Hey, it’s all right. She will understand if you give her some time or explain yourself better,” I said.

Suddenly, she leaned in, and I couldn’t help but hug her. She had been there for me when I needed her the most. She was the one who helped me overcome the rejection I faced from that princess. I exhaled deeply and rubbed her shoulder to calm her down. "I don't know, Agastya. I love her. I mean, I can’t be without her," she said, and I gulped nervously, unsure of how to explain. If we win the war, I’ll ask her to stay in Suryagarh. But if we join Mehrangarh in the war, she can stay in her own kingdom, as she wishes.

"I can’t live alone, Agastya. I can’t; I love-" "Kunwarsa." When I heard Suman’s voice, my eyes widened in shock. I immediately turned to see her holding a plate of food in her hand. Rashmika straightened up and wiped her tears, too. Looking blankly into her eyes, my heart sank even deeper. After everything, this was all that was left to happen. I felt completely ruined—from all sides.

I exhaled, and she said, "Oh, I’m sorry. I brought you dinner." Before I could reply, Rashmika interrupted, "Oh, that's okay. Thank you so much." I bit my lip and silently watched her leave. Her face looked even more hurt now. I couldn’t say anything about her in front of Rashmika. I couldn’t bring any problems upon her just because of me.

"Are you having dinner now?" Rashmika asked, looking at me, and I didn't know what to say. "My dinner just left," I blurted out, and she frowned in confusion. "What?" I rolled my eyes. "I mean, my dinner is left here, on the table, by her. Yes, dinner. I'm hungry." Suddenly, I felt the urge to run.

"Oh my God. I totally forgot. Bhaisa called me. I need to talk to him. I'll see you later," I said, quickly getting up from the couch and walking out of the room. It was dark now, and I rubbed my palms together as I ran a little, trying to catch up with her. I reached out to stop her. She turned around, her angry eyes locking onto mine, and before I could grasp the situation, she pushed me away with all her strength.

"Suman," I muttered, trying to grab her hand, but she struggled to pull away. "Leave my hand!" she yelled. I quickly took her to a corner and placed my finger over her lips. "Shhh, slow down," I managed to say, but she began to pound her fists against my chest, trying to push me away.

"Hey, listen to me, Suman," I tried to say, but she hit me hard on the chest and I was left with no choice but to hold both of her wrists and twist one of her arms behind her. "Would you please let me explain? It's not what you think," I said, but she glared at me with fiery eyes. The nearby fire torch cast dark yellow and orange shadows, tightening my chest as I looked at her furious red gaze.

She fought against me, and I stepped closer, tightening my grip on her wrists behind her back. She pressed herself against the wall, her chest rising and falling with fury, and I gulped silently before saying, "It's not what you think." She gritted her teeth, staring intensely into my eyes.

"You know what? Men like you can never be trusted. You have no control. All you want is women. If someone says no, then you wrap someone else in your arms. This is your reality, and it's why no girl ever stays with you," she whispered fiercely, and I inhaled deeply, shaking my head.

"You're getting it all wrong, Suman. Let me explain," I tried to say, and she frowned. "Explain? Explain what? How do you explain that your fiancée was hugging you while you wrapped your arms around her when just this morning you were crying about me?" she shot back, and I gulped nervously, unsure of how to make her understand.

"She's my friend, Suman," I said, but she interrupted. "Friend? Oh really? Lies and lies and lies. For a moment, I thought I shouldn't have said all of that to you. For a moment, I thought maybe you wouldn't hurt me. But it's not even a moment since I found you getting romantic with your fiancée."

"It wasn't romance, Suman," I tried to explain, but she stared deep into my eyes. "Stop lying. You think you're a prince, that you can get everything, and just because you saved me, you can say I'm falling for you and use me just like you've always done. You are completely mistaken."

"So do you," I couldn't help but raise my voice. It hurt even more. Did I trust the wrong person with all of this? "You are ruining my life. You're making me insane with your words, actions, and presence. You're driving me mad. You're pulling me toward you when I don't want to. I can't stand you!"

Her tear-filled eyes locked onto mine, and I loosened my grip. "You're misunderstanding everything. Please, trust me and let me explain," I pleaded, but she gritted her teeth. "Trust you? I've seen it with my own eyes.

"So, it doesn't matter what I say?" I asked, my brows furrowed in confusion as she inhaled sharply.

"You think I'm a fool. You thought, Oh, she's hurt. I can win her over with my charm. You're wrong, Kunwar Agastya Dev Singh. You proved me right in just one day. What you say doesn't matter because I now know who you are—a coward who sleeps with women to feel better about himself. I will never be that woman. Let go of my hand," she raised her voice at me, and I felt the anger and hurt boiling up inside me all at once.

"Oh," I tried not to say anything. She pushed me away.

"I really hope you didn't save me that day," she muttered angrily, and I nodded silently, watching her walk away.

Anger fumed within me, and I slammed my fist into the wall, causing the knuckles of my wounded hand to bleed.

I walked away from him. Far, very far.

A part of me was breaking. My feet shook, and I could not trudge. I felt as if something had drained all my strength.

My wrists throbbed from his tight and painful grip. What once felt beautiful now seemed like a mistake.

Why, God?

Why did you bring him into my life only to cause me more pain? Why did you save me if your only intention was to make me suffer? Why did he have to betray me like that?

He nearly confessed his love for me, instantly pulling Princess Rashmika into his arms. How could he be so heartless?

I didn't even have the right words to curse him.

I wasn't sure how to refer to him. He was such a womanizer.

I sighed heavily and cried quietly once I reached my room and closed the door. I shouldn't have seen him as a manwhore. He saved me. He fought to protect my life.

But that didn't mean he could destroy my life.

Who granted him the right to play with my life? Who allowed him to hurt me like that? Furthermore, who gave him the authority to do this to me?

"Suman," his low, deep voice suddenly caught my attention from the other side of the door.

My heart raced even faster as I wiped away my tears and shook my head.

"Go away," I said, and he responded from the other side of the door.

"Suman, please open the door so I can explain. You're misunderstanding everything. It's not what you think," he said as I gritted my teeth, feeling the anger rise inside me. I had dealt with this before. This was just the talk of a cheater, a bastard.

"I said, go away and don't create a scene here," my voice raised, and I heard him inhale deeply before attempting to push my limits even further.

"Suman, I understand you're angry, upset, and hurt by what you saw and heard. Can you give me a chance to explain? Rashmika is just a friend. She was having a tough day."

I closed my eyes and fisted my fingers in anger.

"Oh really? Is that how you console someone? That's how you treated women on all those trips to the brothels. You comfort them because they have bad days and tough lives. You know what this is—it's who you are. You disguise your actions with sugar-coated wor—"

"Suman," he cut me off. "I told you everything with my true intentions. Why would I sugarcoat them?" A few more tears rolled down my cheeks.

"You sugarcoat them because this is who you are," I said. "You are a coward and do not want people to know your reality. You want to hide it from everyone under your charm and handsomeness. I feel really bad to say, but actually, you are a man whore," with pure anger, and my chest rose and down with each passing moment. The vision of him sitting with Rashmika blurred my mind along with the imagination of him doing all the romantic and intimate things to brothel women.

I didn't understand why it was hurting so much. What the hell did I expect from him? What the hell did I want to hear?

I stared at the door, and with each passing moment, the walls closed in on me. The silence pierced my heart, and fresh tears rolled down my cheeks when the reply didn't come.

I bit my lip and averted my eyes, blinking in confusion.

My body shook, and I stared at my trembling hands.

What on earth was happening to me?

Why did it bother me so much? Why did it hurt this badly? Over the past seven years, I had trained myself to be as unfeeling as stone, refusing to cry at bad moments or laugh at good ones.

What had become of that Suman? Why was this Suman crying over a man? What exactly was I weeping for?

I swore I wouldn't cry. I didn't want to be like him. Why would I? Would he find hundreds of other women? He had asked me to hide my feelings from everyone, too.

I wouldn't fall for him, not at all.

I wiped my tears and tried to calm down. I had to forget him. I couldn't keep hurting myself like this. I wouldn't cause myself such pain. I was happy before him; I could remain like that for the rest of my life. Yet, at that moment, it felt unbearably difficult to even think of him, and impossible not to believe him.

It was as if I couldn't exist without him.

I lay back and wrapped myself in the comforters, seeking some sleep. It was becoming overwhelming.

The idea of going to Mahabaleshgarh with Daadisa for a while seemed appealing.

Neither of us would be hurt by seeing each other.

I swallowed hard and became lost in countless thoughts of him—both painful and joyful—before I realized I had fallen asleep.

The sunlight felt different when I opened my eyes and got out of bed. After a bath, I focused on not thinking about him as I

attended to my morning routine.

Once dressed, I headed to Nandani's chamber and found her with the Princess. She swallowed hard at the sight of me and asked, just like the day before,

"Everything okay? Suman?"

I nodded, put on a smile, and started organizing her chamber, putting everything in its place.

"Yes, everything's fine," I replied, inhaling deeply before sitting beside her.

"Nandani, I was considering going with Daadisa to Mahabaleshgarh for a bit. She seems happy with me," I started, but she narrowed her brows and responded,

"But Daadisa is staying here with us. I told you; you know she didn't leave with Nandan."

I stared at her blankly, unable to recall when she had mentioned it. I didn't know what to say.

"Oh, okay," I mumbled and nodded.

"I should check what breakfast is today," I added and walked to the kitchen. Something felt off, but I couldn't pinpoint what it was. I didn't want to see him. An unknown weight sat heavily on my chest, along with a hint of regret for saying things he didn't want to hear.

But he was cheating on me. Just that morning, we had been together in his bathing pool, holding hands and sharing our feelings, and by the end of the day, he was in his chamber with Princess Rashmika, hugging her.

How could he do that? Especially knowing how much it hurt me.

I sighed deeply and tasted the food to check the spice levels and quality before plating it for everyone.

I didn't check or inquire about his plate; there were plenty of attendants to take care of him.

After breakfast, I spent the afternoon with Nandani, who attempted to engage me in conversation, aware of what was happening. However, noticing my silence, she held back. I didn't want to discuss it with anyone.

In the evening, I checked on dinner preparations, and afterward, I returned to my room to sleep. It felt good. I hadn't seen him, hadn't gone to his chamber, hadn't tried to find him, or thought about him.

It was good for both of us, especially for me. I didn't want to hurt myself.

I woke up the next day and resumed my chores. The day was brighter than the last, yet deep down, I longed to see him. I waited for him to come to me, to argue with me, to talk to me. But ignoring him felt better; I sighed and focused on my tasks.

The day passed similarly: helping Nandani, meeting Daadisa, who tried to introduce me to another man, urging me to settle down. I told her I was content as I was.

But I wasn't sure if I was truly happy.

I went to bed at night, and several days passed like that. I avoided his chamber, didn't check on his meals, and refrained from any actions that might lead me to him.

After a week, on a fine morning, while overseeing breakfast preparations in the kitchen, I noticed the attendants arranging everyone's plates.

I checked each plate, as I often did during surprise inspections.

Yet something felt off.

"Wait," I halted all the attendants and scanned their faces holding plates before me.

Ranaji's, Nandani's, Prince Ranvijay's, Princess Aishwarya's, Daadisa's, the head commander's, and other royals—all their plates were ready.

"Where is Kunwar Agastya's plate?" I asked, looking at the attendants. One stepped forward, delivering news that twisted my heart.

"He hasn't been in the Kingdom for over a week now."

"What?" My brows furrowed in disbelief.

"What do you mean?" I pressed on, feeling my fingers grow cold.

"Yes, he isn't in the Kingdom. He left over a week ago for some work," another attendant added, and I stood stunned by this new information.

And no one told me. He didn't even try to say anything to me. How could he leave without even notifying me?

I immediately walked toward Nandani's chamber and found her playing with the Princess in the bright sunlight.

"Nandani," I called, stepping close to her. She lifted her gaze from the Princess and looked at me.

"Yes, what happened?" she asked, straightening up, settling the Princess in her lap, and putting her back to sleep.

"You did not tell me," I stated in disbelief. There was no way she didn't know about him leaving.

Her face turned confused, and she replied, "What?"

I sat beside her and muttered. "Kunwar Agastya is not in the Kingdom," I said, and she nodded while smiling at the Princess.

"Yes, I know," she said, and I didn't realize I suddenly felt angry at her.

"What do you mean you know?" I asked, and she looked at me with a confused yet calm smile.

"I know that he is not in the Kingdom. He left ten days ago for Pratapgarh for some work," she explained, and my eyes widened with shock.

"And you didn't even tell me?" I raised my voice at her, and she gritted her teeth. "What do you mean I didn't tell you? Is it my job to keep you informed about his whereabouts? How can you talk to me? How do I know whether or not you know? And when you didn't even try to meet him once when he was leaving, not even coming out of your room to see him go, why do you even care?"

She looked at me, and I didn't know why, but her words sliced through my heart. She had never spoken to me like this.

"Why are you being rude to me, Nandani?" I asked slowly, and she lifted her gaze to me.

"Am I being rude to you? Can you even listen to yourself? Can you even realize what you're doing or not? I'm just surprised that the man you spent the entire night in his chamber went out over ten days ago, and you don't even know where he is. It's unbelievable, Suman," she said, and my heart raced as I tried to respond.

"He cheated on me, Nandani. I found him hugging Princess Rashmika in his chamber," I said. She stared at me silently for a moment before lowering her gaze.

"Then your concern for him doesn't seem valid. Just get some rest," she said coldly with a smile. I didn't understand why, but she was hurting me.

"Nandani, what's wrong? Why are you being so cold?" I asked, placing my hand on her knee, and she looked up at me.

"What happened to me? Suman. Seriously? First, I find you spending a night with my brother-in-law, and it turns out my best friend has some romantic connection with him, with a history. That's okay; I accept it and try to support it. But then, when I literally ask you daily what happened? How are you doing? You don't even tell me a single thing about what's happening in your life? You make me feel invisible. And suddenly, you come to me with a raised voice, claiming I didn't inform you. Did you even care? Were we even talking about him for the last ten days? And suddenly, you come back playing the friend card? You know what, I can't do this right now," she said, standing up and walking into her chamber.

Agastya

I was done.

I was done trying to make her understand. She seemed to avoid me, possibly to punish me and clearly wanted nothing more to do with me.

I inhaled sharply and turned away from her door.

Something inside broke—something beyond repair. The final ounce of hope lies shattered.

The last hope of finding someone to hold on to had gone.

I returned to my room, completed my war plans, and left the following day; I had told Rudra Bhaisa.

She didn't come to see me off, and I didn't want her to either.

I didn't feel it anymore. I could force her into a relationship, but I couldn't ensure her happiness against her will.

She wanted to be happy, but it seemed like all she really wanted was to hate someone.

When she was done hating, and I was done loving, we couldn't be anything to each other anymore.

And now it was my choice.

Fuck love.

I arrived in Pratapgarh early in the morning and met the head commander of Mahabaleshgarh with his troop. "Commander Ashwin," I greeted with a broad smile, dismounting from my horse.

He stood, joining his hands, "Welcome to Pratapgarh, Kunwar Agastya." I clasped over his hands, accepting his greetings, before stepping ahead for a tight hug.

We all were friends from the Gurukul—Ashwin, Eklavya, and many others.

"How are you?" I asked, shaking his shoulders with pride. He was one of the brightest stars among us.

"I can't be any better," he smiled.

Pratapgarh had completely transformed since the last time I saw it. Significant reconstruction had altered the landscape, and the trees and greenery appeared vibrant. The flooring, scenery, and everything else were mesmerizing.

"It's beautiful. King Abhinandan has done a phenomenal job here." I couldn't help but admire it, unlike those who failed to appreciate someone's effort and dedication.

"Indeed, he has. After all, he has great taste in architecture and a fine knowledge of colors," Ashwin added, earning a gentle nod from me.

"Alright, what's the situation here?" I asked. He stepped back to place the map on the stone table, which was adorned with small stone-carved soldier idols in their respective positions.

"If the situation escalates at Mehrangarh, I will meet the Army with King Abhinandan twenty miles before Pratapgarh. We'll deploy the troops in three divisions. The first will be the front-line soldiers on elephants and horses—deadly and highly capable—waiting for the army twenty miles from here. We will assign hidden troops to take out the army's smaller contingents lying in ambush along the route. They will hide among the trees; they're known for their marksmanship. The third group will comprise soldiers stationed at Pratapgarh castle itself, equipped with the remaining elephants, horses, and weapons," he explained as I focused on the map to understand his words.

"Alright. That looks like a solid plan. Attacking them in phases would weaken them," I patted him on his shoulder.

"And remember, Ashwin, we won't give them an inch of our land, much less a kingdom," I added. He nodded, staring intensely into my eyes before replying, "We will not, Kunwar Agastya."

Next, I asked him to show me the stock of weapons, rations, and emergency travel supplies. I also encouraged him to bring in some physicians, cooks, and male attendants for the Kingdom. This would enable the soldiers to concentrate solely on the war.

After a long discussion, I asked to take my leave, but he stopped me, insisting that I should at least spend the night there and leave in the morning since it was already dark.

I agreed and spent the night on the terrace under the starry sky. The image of her face haunted my heartbeats against my will. I didn't want to cause her pain, but it hurt me now.

I knew that what I had done in my past was wrong, but I confided in her because I trusted her—or at least I believed she would understand me, as she promised to stand by my side through everything. However, she changed overnight.

In that moment, I realized it wasn't just hurt or resentment; it was mostly about the fact that she didn't trust me. And under no circumstances, no matter how deeply you love someone, nothing will ever make sense if there is no trust.

My efforts were in vain because she didn't trust me. I asked her if she could trust me regarding my words, but she declined. Nothing hurt me more than that.

Still, I understood it was all because of her past. She had a painful history, and she was simply a wounded soul.

But I couldn't let anyone else step into my heart. I offered the rest of my heart to her. And she shattered it for both of us.

I took a deep breath, promising myself that no matter what happened next, I would never picture the two of us together, not even in my worst nightmares.

She called me a manwhore. That was true. I was one, but I didn't want to hear it from her mouth. She didn't have to hurt me

like that.

I closed my eyes, holding back tears. I would not cry for her, not for anyone anymore. No one could change that for me—no one's love, hate, or demands. I was done with love in this life.

Maybe, try in the next one.

Now, I only had to expand our kingdom and make this land the most powerful continent.

I attempted to catch some sleep, but she eluded me. Her thoughts kept me restless all night, and I woke up with a headache.

After preparing in my warrior attire, I left Pratapgarh for Mehrangarh, only to find Eklavya already there. He had taken a break from Rashmika, fabricating stories about his grandmother's death.

"Eklavya," I called out as I spotted him where we had agreed to meet. He carried two bags and a few soldiers.

"Is everything ready?" I asked.

"Yes, everything's prepared," she stated before inquiring, "But what are you planning to do?"

I rolled my tongue over my lips, struggling with the thin air. "I am planning to fuck these motherfuckers in my way," I promised, and he thinned brows with confusion.

"But what is your way? Agastya?" he chuckled softly.

I rested my hand on his shoulder and looked at the soldiers observing me. There were five of them. "Listen to me very carefully," I started, drawing everyone's attention.

"Keep this rope hanging in this empty well for seven days. Do not leave this place. I will come back soon through this rope. And," I inhaled deeply and looked at Eklavya. "If I do not return in seven days, do not tell anyone until we win the war," I ordered, and his expression changed immediately.

"But where are you going?" he asked, looking into his eyes. "Just listen to me carefully, Eklavya,"

"If I don't return in seven days, take the lead and go near the army with the trained arrow shooters. Hide behind the trees and kill the invaders immediately. Do not leave a single one alive, understand?" I asked, and he nodded, looking at me. I leaned forward and hugged him tightly.

"Jai Mahakaal," I cheered, to which he responded with a determined and powerful voice, "Jai Mahakaal."

Looking at the soldiers, I nodded and ordered, "Hang the rope."

I took one bag with me and walked toward a large group of soldiers waiting for me at the requested place.

I walked toward the wide, dry river opening I had discovered with Eklavya the other day and saw the soldiers waiting for me. Ashwin had appointed them all at my request.

"So, have you all had breakfast?" I asked, glancing at the soldiers with a hint of fear. "Yes, commander," one of them thundered in a loud voice, and I appreciated looking at him.

"Bahut se yudh lade honge aapne aaj tak. Lekin aaj to karya karna hai vo yudh ladne se jyada mehtavpoorn hai. Chahe jo bhi ho jae, galti nahi honi chahiye, or thakna to bilkul nahi,"

"You all must have fought many wars by now. But the work you have to do today is far more important than any war. No matter what happens, no mistakes should be made, and you must not tire until it is finished," I said, and they all replied with a strong voice.

"Jai Mahakaal,"

"Jai Mahakaal," I replied in the same tone, and we all entered the same area inside the cave. With the help of the fire torches, I finally reached the spot where the cannons were placed. Everyone was shocked to see them, and I told them to immediately remove the ropes they were carrying and tie them to the cannons.

I asked them to do ten cannons at a time. It took quite a while, and it felt like evening fell as a small group of soldiers arrived with food and water supplies for them. After the meal, we all resumed our work, and I helped tie the ropes to the cannon.

"Come on, pull them forward to the outside now and take them where I asked you to take them," I said, helping them move the cannons up the slopes. I instructed them to get the cannons out, and it took almost five and a half hours to remove twenty cannons from the cave.

"Take them to the place I asked you all to take them to," I said, and one of them asked. "Commander, you won't come?"

I smiled at him and shook my head. "You take charge from here, and if I don't arrive in time for the attack, let Commander Eklavya take over," I said, and they all nodded.

They ghosted the cannons away with the help of elephants covered in black clothes.

I was alone now.

I closed my eyes and prayed to Mahadev to watch over everyone and ensure that no one died in this war—not a single soldier.

I went back into the cave and began examining it closely. I pressed my ear against the cave walls to listen for the water level on the other side, if there was any, because I had noticed dampness on the rocks the previous day.

That simply meant a parallel water channel was running alongside this dry channel, but there was a thick wall separating us.

All I had to do was find the spot where the wall was thin.

If I couldn't burn these cannons to ashes, I could destroy them with water.

I continued searching for the next one and a half days for the thin places and marked a few. Now, I needed to explore the high-pressure point where the water would be heavy and turbulent, flowing with such force that it would take everything with it.

I was about to start hitting that place with the axe. But suddenly, I heard some movement in the cave. My ears perked up, and I quickly ducked behind a wall, extinguishing the torch in my hand. I couldn't afford to be caught. I watched a troop of Mehrangarh soldiers arrive to take out the cannons.

Damn!

The troops of soldiers were taking the cannons out. This was the do-or-die moment. I had to break the water. I could not let them move even a single one.

Closing my eyes and inhaling a deep breath, I lifted the axe. Pacing a few steps away, I calmed my wild and intensely racing heartbeats.

Suman's flashed through my mind. She'd survive if I died. I shouldn't need to think about her.

And, Bhaisa, you both are happily married and have reasons to stay alive and not do this suicide mission. But I do not have any, and being alive, I could not let you two do any of this.

Rudraja will always be my favorite child, no matter how many would come. I love you, baby.

I truly love everyone: Bhabhisa, Rudraja, Guruji, Abhinandan, Eklavya, Ashwin, Ashwait, Trisha, Maasima, and everyone I have ever met.

I exhaled deeply, trying to control my emotional turbulence, and lifted the axe high in the air before hitting the marked point.

"Hey, who are you? What are you doing?" I heard the voices but ignored them.

I hit the wall again, using all the strength I had left with.

"Hey, hey, hey, what the hell are you doing? Stop!" the swords were, and I closed my eyes before hitting the wall again.

They sprinted towards me, and my breaths stopped, gazing at them momentarily.

A commotion erupted in the cave, followed by a sudden earthquake.

My heart came into my mouth. I tried to stay firm in my place. A few of them fell. The screams erupted. I felt scared to death.

But not terrified.

"If you want to stay alive, just run," I warned them and hit the wall again.

A crack ran through the wall as lightning struck in the thunder—the noise of the wall breaking at the speed of the snake.

It suffocated.

One more attack and it would be game over.

I didn't hesitate.

The river broke free through the crack, and I knew one more hit, and it would be done.

"We will kill you, stop!"

"I said stop," they yelled at me, but they didn't step forward as they were equally terrified.

"Jai Mahakaal, Har Har Mahadev!!" I screamed with all my strength and hit one last time.

My heart stopped, standing frozen, as the crack widened in the wall.

It had grown to seven to ten meters in height and width, like a thundering current.

I closed my eyes, pacing back. River rushed through the broken wall as clouds burst, and floods swallowed the villages.

The dry mud dampened.

The sound of high-pressure water leaking echoed through the cave as I watched the soldiers step back.

"Run, run away from here," they yelled to each other as they ran.

Suddenly, the wall broke, and a flood hit me like a mountain.

I could not believe it; a ten-metre-tall wall collapsed like a castle of sand. The rock hit my head, and I cried out. The water crashed into me, smashing me into the wall.

My breathing swallowed, and I noticed the tunnel filling faster with the water. It began flowing towards the low point, taking me with it effortlessly.

I had to reach the high end, to the well.

I lifted my axe and, at one point, hit it in the tunnel ceiling to stop myself from running into the water.

It missed.

I groaned.

I threw my hands and legs to swim through the monstrous flow.

I hit again.

Missed.

"What the hell?" I yelled. "Urghhhhhh,"

My shoulder hit the wall, cracking skin and drawing blood. The water rushed into my mouth, reaching to my nose. I lifted my face, panting harder against the ceiling.

But it didn't work.

I hit the axe again, trying to find a spot where I could hang.

Missed again, flowed along the water.

But amid all this, a smile appeared on my face, noticing the cannons drowning in water.

As I said, I would ruin them with water if I could not burn them.

The cries of soldiers dying, hitting against the cannons, and drowning hit my ear.

I immediately hit the axe again and finally hung on the ceiling, waiting for the water flow to calm down.

My knuckles whitened. I held myself with one hand, rotating with the other, consuming all my energy.

Thankfully, the groundwater was not that cold and dense.

I waited until it calmed, filling the empty spaces in the tunnel.

Now, you can't take the cannons out until the water drains. And in this life, the water would never drain.

I exhaled deeply and started swimming toward the river's prime point, where the rope awaited me.

It was pitch dark here.

My only hope was my memory. I began swimming with the axe to take breaks between small sessions.

Suddenly, my head hit hard against a rock, "Urghhhhhhhh," and I cried out in pain.

"Oh, my god!"

I didn't know if I bled since I couldn't tell the difference between blood and water.

But I kept going.

I was brutally tired and sleepy and dizzy.

But a war awaited my leadership, and I needed to do it for everyone's safety.

To keep my blood warm, I thought of my family, whom I had to see upon returning. But not Suman. I wasn't sure why, but I didn't want to talk to her. I didn't have the courage.

You know what the other person thinks about, and if it's not what you expected, then you might not look into their eyes.

I am unsure how I feel about her at the moment, but it is certainly not a dreamlike experience. She mentioned I was bothering her, that she didn't want to see me, that she didn't trust me, and that she didn't even want to talk to me.

And I didn't know what the hell I had done wrong.

Honestly, if her past was like mine or worse, I would never have questioned it or made her feel ashamed, even if I didn't want to stay with her.

She said 'No' without even hearing me out. I would never turn that into a 'Yes,' even if the world blackmailed me into stopping before it.

Finally, after a long, long time, a light flashed before my eyes. I inhaled a deep breath, noticing the rope hanging.

I swam faster.

Grabbing the rope's end, I screamed at the top of my lungs. "Pull me up,"

No one responded from the other side, and I closed my eyes in exhaustion. I didn't realize my voice wasn't coming from my throat. It burnt.

My whole body burnt.

"I said, pull me up," I yelled again.

No one listened. My body felt weak, and the rope slipped from my hand.

No one replied, and I could feel myself being drowned in the water.

Using the last ounce of energy, I pulled the rope down and felt the restraint tied to the tree.

"Pull me up!" My scream was shaky, and I finally felt the soldier responded, pulling me up.

I curled the rope around my hand. The wound of the cut from the other day opened again, sending waves of brutal pain through me.

Finally, I felt a pair of hands holding me and taking me out.

"Agastya," I felt gentle slaps on my cheeks, but I couldn't see anything. Everything was a blur, and I didn't know what happened next.

I found myself awake; my eyes met with Eklavya's.

"Are you okay?" He asked, helping me sit up.

I nodded and looked around to realize I was in one of the soldier's tents.

"War?" I asked, my head bursting with the unbearable pain.

"Our men noticed the invaders coming through the river. They will be here tomorrow," his words widened my eyes.

I thinned my brows as I stood up. "What?" My headache subsided. "We can't wait for tomorrow." I glared at him and immediately fell back, unable to keep my feet steady on the ground.

"You're injured, Agastya. You have several wounds and cuts. You need medicine," Eklavya said, holding my shoulders. I shook my head before I realized I was wearing different clothes.

"If I think about my injury, the entire Hind will get injured. And who the hell changed my clothes without my permission?" I roared, glaring at Eklavya.

His face was confused and flushed.

He came near, “Agastya,” and murmured in my ear. “You have your thing pierced?"

My eyes widened. "How dare you change my clothes without my permission!"

He hid his smile. “I am just asking, man. Why? Is it good? Should I get it done, too? How did you get to know about it?”

He clearly made fun of me, and I gazed around, wondering who was hearing us.

No one.

"I mean, it's interesting. A small tribe in *Sindhiya* does that. I have read about it in history books," I answered.

"Bhabhisa knows?"

I gritted my teeth, blazing. ***"Unko muh fulane se fursat hogi, tab to janengi,"*** "She will know only if she gets time from crying,"

Confused, he furrowed his brows, and I smacked his chest and asked, “I hope you didn’t change my clothes in front of the entire village.”

He smirked. “Um, not the village, just a few attendees who helped me change your clothes,” he said, and I shook my head in disbelief.

"I hate you, Eklavya. I hate you," I said, pressing my hand on my head; they had bandaged me.

"We should go now," I said.

"Yes, we should," the seriousness returned in his voice.

We both mounted our horses and rode to the highest point of the mountains on either side of the river.

Eklavya had already positioned the cannons on both sides—ten on each—hidden behind the bushes and trees, at twenty meters. All the placements also included the cannonballs.

The only thing we missed was the trail. We didn’t have time for the testing. But King Abhinandan explained to me how to use them effectively.

I looked at the soldier sitting there with the binoculars.

"What's the news?" I asked, raking it from his and putting it before my eyes.

"They are near,"

"Keep an eye on them," I returned it.

I sat on the stone with a bag in my hand, waiting for the boats to arrive. A wave of panic washed over the soldier as he gazed through the glasses.

“Did you find the king of the army?” I asked him, and he squinted his eyes.

“Yes,” he replied, “it seems like the army has a king,” though unsure.

Sailing the boat, I arrived at the cannon we had. Then, I took the gun from my bag and stood up.

"Light the fire," I ordered a small troop of soldiers with me. They lit the fire, took their arrows, and bowed out.

I bit my lips and fired a shot into the air, alerting the entire army of invaders.

Hundreds of boats were approaching. They drew their swords, and suddenly, the fireworks began.

A loud, earth-shattering sound erupted through the mountain ranges as we fired the first cannon, targeting the boat and killing around fifty soldiers at a time.

Eklavya handed the army from the other side of the mountains, and I watched the invaders jump into the water, trying to emerge from the river.

"Give me the bow," I asked the soldier. Tugging the arrow on the bow, I lit its oiled tip and pointed at the river’s shore, where the vast dried grass stood tall.

It was all covered with the burning oil.

I loosened my fingers, and within a fraction of a moment, the grassy beach was blazing on fire.

Eklavya did the same from the other side, and soldiers boosted the cannon attacks.

But the invaders spotted us and took out their bows and arrows as well.

I placed the arrow down and fired another shot with my gun, signaling the soldiers to intensify the cannon’s attacks. Our soldiers, hidden in the trees, started their arrow assaults.

The noise of cannons echoed through the mountain ranges, shaking the vast stones with earth-shattering tremors. A cataclysmic roar threatened to destroy everything in its path.

The thick clouds rising from the gunpowder smoke drifted high into the sky, while the fiery smoke billowing from the tall grasses added heavy into black clouds.

I coughed and watched the enemy soldiers burning as they jumped into the river, becoming a feast for crocodiles, if there were any, in the water.

It was satisfying to treat them as they had treated others. How could they even think about burning our kingdom, our region?

I wouldn’t leave a single one of them alive. They were trying and struggling. They bleed. One got shot into his head; his head

burst open, satisfying me for some strange reason.

I wanted to see them bleed with pain. They had enraged me.

Their cries blurred under the cannon's attacks. A round shot landed right over a big ship. It cracked into two on the spot. The soldiers burnt. They threw their hands, shredding clothes, jumping into the water, but our archers fucked them, piercing their hearts.

The boats behind the sunk one turned around and fastened towards us. And I immediately fired three gunshots, pinning soldiers' attention to them.

Archers mounted the horses, taking the invaders down.

I climbed on my horse, armed with my gun, bow, arrows, and sword, and gripped the reins with my trembling fingers.

"Come on, Ashwait. I need to fuck them down," I told my horse, bouncing on his back as he raced faster through the steep mountain in a crisscross pattern, avoiding the trees.

I looked at the invading soldier, lifting his bow to me at the banks of the river, and I grabbed my bow and arrow to shoot right into his mouth, hollowing his head.

He fell back. Ashwait raced even faster to reach the riverbank, filled with small, finely shaped stones. I patted Ashwait's back to slow him down while attacking the invaders alone.

I hastened, shooting arrows one after another at them. Even the cannons were inching closer, and finally, a troop of soldiers arrived, loading the guns into the boats and running after them.

I yanked Ashwait's reins to stop him and climbed down. Sprinting toward the river, I plunged into the water to swim to the ship.

The soldiers helped me climb it.

"Give me that!" I exclaimed, snatching the ball from the soldier's hand. After putting it in the hole, I told another soldier to light the tail with the torch when I signaled. I aimed it at the running ship. The water chilled my fingers and soaked my clothes.

But the blood in my veins boiled with anger, hatred, and countless emotions I couldn't comprehend at that moment.

"Light it," I yelled.

My gaze, intense at the tail, sparkling before burning down. I tightened my fist on the cannon's handle, aiming at the giant boat.

Boom!

It shook me to the core, visibly.

The release of the projectile was so forceful that my entire body shook from the impact. I watched closely as it soared before landing directly on the ship's bow, splitting it in two. The soldiers caught fire and leaped high into the air from the blast, and I raised my hand slightly to signal the archers to aim at them.

I did not want any of them alive.

A rain of arrows followed my command, killing almost all the invaders.

"One more," I ordered, turning back to the soldiers. They put on another cannonball.

"Speed up the ship!" I yelled at the soldiers, and we began pursuing the enemy ships, attempting to escape.

"Light it," I hurried.

I aimed at the other boat, and boom.

It broke into pieces, and all the soldiers drowned in the river.

Motherfuckers!

"More," I said, and we sailed after them, but my heart stopped instantly when I saw a massive boat, twice our size, speeding toward us.

And, suddenly, I noticed something else as well.

"Give me the fucking binoculars!" my fingers trembled, taking it from a soldier.

The moment I held it up to my eyes and saw a massive cannon and a few soldiers on that giant ship, I screamed. "Fall back!!"

The cannon was not the same as we had.

I yelled to all the boats, "I said, turn around," and cried again, "Fucking get out of here!" My voice faded amidst the cannon fire, and suddenly, that enormous ship set to launch an assault.

I quickly drew my gun and aimed it at them. But, because of the distance and the waves rocking the boat, I couldn't keep my aim steady. Still, I clenched my fists tightly, and suddenly, a roar erupted from the cannon.

My gaze sharpened at the cannonball flying in the air, and before it could reach any closer to me, I aimed hard with my gun, diffusing it in mid-air. A dense smoke of clouds erupted.

My heartbeats raced wildly, gazing at the person leading the charge from the enemy side, and before I could understand anything, he shot another fierce cannonball.

It hit our ship, cracking it into pieces. The soldiers fell into the river.

My jaw tightened as half of the boat behind my back was gone.

"Light it up,"

I ordered to the soldier still holding grounds with me. We faced imminent drowning. I had this only chance.

Fisting my hands on the cannon's handle, "Fucking light it up," I roared. Though his hands trembled uncontrollably, he carried on.

I aimed at the bottom of their boat, but he fired along.

His cannonball smashed into our cannon. Everything went dark. I was too stunned to react. My ears were unresponsive, and my eyes saw nothing. There was only a ringing sound enveloping me I could hear.

I drowned deep, and when my breath hit my chest, I tried to go up.

Facing out, I panted hard, adjusting my vision of their ship's broken base and the water getting into it.

Some harm was done.

A smile lingered, but I gritted my teeth angrily as they attacked another of our boats.

But, it was not enough.

I swam on the ship.

They could not run alive.

I grabbed the ropes hanging from his ship and climbed. It swung, tilting sideways and losing its balance, as I pulled the rope with all my strength.

My hands ached. The cuts began to bleed, but I tried to climb faster.

The moment I stepped onto their boat, I looked at the tall, well–built soldiers who were looking at me.

Surprise!

They immediately lifted their swords, and I nodded, looking at them, trying to catch my breath.

Raking my eyes, I counted their number, which totaled over fifty, and I brought my hand to the side of my waist to take my three-foot-long sword out.

Tilting my head sidewards, I paced back and looked at the men in deep grey attires. I bit my lips to remind myself that my family awaited me. That my Bhaisa would kill me if anything happened to me.

Without me, Rudraja wouldn't have a glorious upbringing, and my Bhabhisas would be devastated.

I gritted my teeth and remembered the person I wished to forget. Yet, if anything were to happen to me, she would also be heartbroken. She could not forgive herself; she would think it happened because of her.

Soldiers ran towards me, and I moved my sword through the flesh and beheaded the first one. His head flew out of the boat. The blood splashed over my face before I grabbed the neck of another one in my hand.

They had pissed me off.

How could they kill our soldiers?

First, they try to enter our land and then kill our people.

"Not done"! I clicked my tongue, pressing harder into his neck. He choked, and another one attacked me. I moved my sword into his stomach, in and out at a thundering speed, before slicing another's head.

My other hand dragged the man along. His body struggled to be freed, to breathe, and I could not stop deepening my fingers into the side of his neck to pull the primary nerves out.

He died, earning a soft chuckle from me.

Suddenly, a soldier cut through my arm, and I lifted my gaze to look at him.

Amazing!

His eyes widened.

The water dripped down my face and ears as I shook my head slowly.

"Bass yahi nahi karna tha," "You shouldn't have done this," I muttered, shifting the sword from my left to right hand, and confused him by lifting it high in the air but swirled it around his chest, slicing him into two.

His inner tubes pooled out, blood dissolving into the water, and I might have noticed his poop.

It disgusted me, so I moved to the other ones.

The ship was sinking, death awaiting, death lord somewhere around, but I kept killing them one after the other. They could live only over my dead body.

I got cuts as well. But, when you have the right intention, even the devil kneels before you.

And they had to.

The death lord must wait!

After killing those fifty men, I marched closer to the cannon attacking my people and noticed a seven-foot-tall man with hip-length hair and deep red eyes.

"What the hell do you eat?" I gritted my teeth angrily as he laughed, looking at me and tsking.

I bit on my lip and tasted the blood. Some dripped down my forehead as well.

"Who are you?" I asked, and he did something that pissed me off beyond measure.

He held the cannon right before me and turned it towards me.

I could not help but laugh.

"Haha,"

His face fell looking at me, and I could not help but laugh even louder. "Hahahhahaha, tsk tsk tsk tsk,"

He gritted his teeth, and I rubbed my mouth off with my cuff.

“Who are you?" He asked, as his eyes showed a tint of fear now.

"Just a soldier," I said, and he gritted his teeth.

"Who is the fucking King?" he roared in a loud and irritating voice, and I took a step ahead, dragging my sword along. It screeched along at the ship’s wet wooden floor.

"Hamare Raja tum jeso ko muh nahi lagate," "Our King does not entertain people like you," I stated.

He inhaled deeply and walked behind the cannon.

I couldn’t stop growling and sprinting ahead. Jumping over and climbing lightly onto the cannon, I grabbed him and pushed him down beneath me.

I punched his face hard, but he laughed.

My anger surged beyond all limits, and I punched him again square in the face. He laughed once more, prompting me to hit his face even harder. The boat rocked side to side, swaying with the turbulent waters stirred up by the cannon attacks.

Out of nowhere, he seized my clothes, pushed me down, and delivered a powerful punch directly to my face. Blood poured from my mouth as I saw stars.

He landed another one before I could open my eyes, and my lips were torn up.

I groaned in pain, gritted my teeth, and held his fist to stop him from punching me again. Staring into his eyes, I shook my head with a soft chuckle.

"Hum nahi…to aage kataar lagi hui hai, bachke to nahi ja paoge," “If not me, then there is a whole queue; you won't be able to escape.” My voice was hoarse, deep, and slightly raspy shaky.

He punched me in the face with his other hand. He grabbed my collar and jerked me, lifting my face off the floor. I felt a rush of dizziness in my head. “Who the hell are you?” he yelled with his filthy mouth, stinking like a gutter, and I chuckled slightly.

“I told you, just a soldier,” I said, then punched him in the eyes. He jerked back and pressed his hand to his eye, letting out a loud cry. “Aanngrrrrrrrhhhhhhhh, bastard!”

I bit my lips, caressed the torn area, and shook my head.

"How will I kiss her now?" I muttered, sat up, held his collar, and pushed him back with all my strength. His head banged into the metal of the cannon, and it started bleeding. He cried out louder, and I banged his head again on the cannon. Again and again.

"Kya socha tha…sab bewakoof hai yaha, bikau hai, ghaas khate hai hum, hmmm," “What the hell were you thinking? Do you think we’re fools here, just for sale, eating grass?” I lost it and clenched my fist to punch him again.

But that bastard moved, and my fist slammed into the cannon’s wheel, making my knuckles bleed.

Ughhhhhhhh. It hurt like hell.

He laughed. "You would never know," he muttered and held my collar to put me down under. He punched my face harder, one after the other, and my head spun with the dizziness.

I looked at him through my bleeding, blurry eyes.

He stood up to pick up his sword from the floor and lifted it high. His steps fumbled as his head was bleeding, too.

He inhaled deeply.

The world stopped. More than half of the ship drowned in the water. My head could feel the water hanging right at the edge.

“Will gift your body to your King,” He screamed louder.

I could not stop laughing, moving my hand over my chest and midriff and took my dagger out.

And, before he could slice my head, I aimed my dagger right into his left eye.

"Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhh," He cried out in pain, pacing back.

I shook my head and muttered.

"Aaj tak koi hamara baal bhi baka nahi kar paya. Hamari Maa rehti hai hamare saath, Tum kis khet ki mooli ho," “No one has ever done any fucking thing to me. My mother is with me. Who do you think you are?” I said, carrying myself straight.

He cried out in pain and lifted the sword again. I grasped the sword and took it from him, kicking at his chest.

He fell back and growled in pain.

I knelt beside his chest, seized his neck, and gazed into his bleeding eyes. The dagger was deep to the handle.

“I do not want to hurt you more, you know, but I need this dagger back…my wife enjoys it better,” I murmured under my breath and grabbed its handle to take it out.

Slowly.

Very slowly.

He screamed in pain as I stood up on my feet. The boat had gone under the water, and I could feel the world spinning around

me.

I could fall dead at any moment. Putting the dagger back in the sheath and, in my chest's pocket, I lifted my sword.

"You know what," He muttered slowly, and I stepped back.

“Even, I am a soldier, too,” He said, and the anger rushed into my body.

I bit on my lips before slicing his head apart from his body.

Fucking Motherfucker!

His body trembled for a moment until he gave up.

I nodded my head with a slight smile.

"Koi ni tumhare bap ko bhi dekh lenge," “Do not worry, will see your King as well.”

And I fell, drowning in the river.

Chasing the end.

Suman

It hurt seeing Nandani walking away from me.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't tell her anything because I didn't want to reveal anything about his past. But it feels like no one understands me. What on earth did I do?

I suddenly didn't know what to feel. My heart sank because I hadn't attempted to meet him, and he left.

And it was entirely my fault. He came to see and tell me something, yet I didn't listen.

What did he want to say?

I bit my lip, tried to hold back my tears, and stood up. I wanted to find out where he had gone. What on earth was happening?

Princess Rashmika was in the Kingdom, so where did he go?

Wait!

Did he go to war?

My heart stopped suddenly, and I felt a tightening in my chest. I turned and ran to Nandani.

"Nandani," I called, watching her lay the Princess on the bed.

"Nandani, can you tell me where he went?" I asked as she sighed, walking toward me, taking my hand, and leading me to the couch.

"Sit down,"

I did before she sat beside me.

I held her hand, trembling, and begged, "Please, Nandani, I'm sorry. I know I haven't told you anything, but is he okay?" My voice wavered, and she nodded, gently caressing my hand. "Yes, he will be fine."

I inhaled a breath of relief.

"But what happened between you two?" she stared into my eyes.

"Nothing; I think I messed it up badly," I accepted, shaking my head and losing my senses.

She patted my shoulder gently, muttering, "Well, if you don't tell me, how can I help you?"

I looked at her. "Nandani," inhaling sharply. "He told me about his past, and it hurt me,"

She frowned. "What? Why?" she questioned.

I tried to recount everything he had told me. It was a long conversation, and I felt lost. I cried while forming the word, and she wrapped her arms around me, murmuring, "Suman, calm down. That's okay,"

I sobbed, and she lifted my chin to make me look at her.

"You know what? Nothing is worth pursuing more than your own heart. I won't say anything about him, whether he's right or wrong, because he has done nothing wrong to anyone, including you. The past doesn't define a person. Even Rudra betrayed me at some point, but that didn't make me love him any less. Agastya has done nothing to you. He has always protected you, saved you, and made you happy. And all you did in return was call him something he didn't want to hear. I know you're heartbroken, but he isn't the reason for your heartbreak. Why would you hurt him?" She explained.

I shook my head. "I don't know, Nandani. It's just that he reminds me of my deceased husband," I tried to explain, looking at Nandani, who stared back at me and shook her head.

"Suman, you shouldn't think about him or anyone right now. If you see your dead husband in Agastya, then I think you should avoid him, stop talking to him, and even stop thinking about him. Just tell him you don't want to be around him," she suggested.

I shook my head. "But I want to, Nandani."

She inhaled deeply. "This way," she said, looking at me. "You're only going to hurt both of you," she murmured. I swallowed silently, staring at her. "If you want to be with him, if you like him or love him, accept him with his past, just as he accepted you with yours. He'll hate you if you keep punishing him for mistakes he never made regarding you. And I don't think he wants that. Tell me, has he ever tried to hurt you?" she asked slowly. I bit my lips, shaking my head.

"But, Nandani, I'm scared. I fear getting hurt again," I tried to explain as she rubbed my hand, looking into my eyes.

"I understand. But I see you don't trust him enough to fall in love. You know, Suman, you can overcome every fight, but you can't overcome insecurity and trust issues. This is the only thing that hurts brutally and deeply," she said.

"But I think I trust him," I tried to argue, and she asked in a slow voice,

"Would you trust him if he told you something without checking it and disregarding what you saw? You saw him with Rashmika, and he said there was nothing between them—that they were just friends. Did you trust him?" she asked slowly, and I shook my head.

"How can I trust him when I see him hugging her, Nandani?" I tried to explain, and she inhaled deeply.

"So what he says doesn't matter to you?" she asked, and I swallowed hard, staring at her in silence.

"I don't know what I'm feeling. I want him back—healthy and happy. I don't want to hurt him. I feel bad. He left without even seeing me. I mean, he could have come to me," I tried to express, and she gritted her teeth and lowered her gaze for a moment.

"He came to you, Suman. He came to your room, attendees told me. You didn't even open the door for him. They saw him

crying outside your door. Just because something heartless happened to you, you're being heartless to someone else for no reason. And he's the one who married you in front of an entire village to protect you. Even before he left, he came to me and told me to look out for you and not stress you unnecessarily. You're my best friend, Suman. In all parts of my life, I've made you my partner in crime. Since meeting you, I've seen nothing less than a sister in you. My family treats you like one of us when your parents don't even know if you're alive or not. But in this, you're wrong. And it's not just because he's my brother-in-law, but because the pain you caused him was unnecessary, and he didn't deserve it. You didn't hesitate even once to call him the same as your dead husband. Has he ever forced himself on you? Did he ever try to hurt you? With him, all I've seen in you is smile and laughter. But you're too boxed in your pain not to want anything good to happen to you. Suman, if you don't accept your past as your past and give life another chance, no matter how good a man comes into your life, you'll never be able to build a good relationship with him. Leave Agastya—can you trust men in general?" she asked, and I sobbed silently.

"It's too difficult, Nandani. I don't know what's wrong with me," I believed as tears rolled down my cheeks.

"Nothing is wrong with you, Suman. You just think something is wrong with you. Believe that you deserve to be happy, too. Why are you afraid of being hurt? If you don't let go of this feeling, you'll never see that you're already hurting yourself. Can't you see that without him, you're already in pain? Can't you notice that it's hard for you to even smile without him? Can't you realize that he's the only man who has truly made you happy, smile, and feel comfort?" she said, as I inhaled deeply and blinked silently.

"I know, Nandani. I know he cares for me and loves me, but I don't understand what's wrong. I don't know why I hurt him, and now I'm unsure how to fix my mistakes. What if he's angry and won't talk to me?" I asked, and she inhaled deeply and gulped before responding.

"Honestly, if I were in Agastya's place, I would never talk to you again. Some things are just beyond self-respect. With what you told me, you not only hurt him but also made him question himself. Do you realize what he must be feeling after hearing all of that from the person to whom he poured his heart out? None of us had the slightest idea of everything he had been through, yet he shared it all with you. His purpose was not to hurt you, Suman. Trust me, Rudra and Prince Ranvijay didn't raise him that way. He might be bubbly and flirty, but he's a genuine man. And putting aside my opinions—just don't do anything. Follow your heart. If you don't want to talk to him, then don't. Don't force yourself to do anything you don't want to do. Eventually, he'll get past this, and no one will ever know what happened between you two. He'll never show it on his face, and trust me, even after this, he won't hate you. So just calm down. I'm sure whatever it is within you, he'll understand. But please understand him too. Don't make it all about yourself," she said, and I gulped silently while listening to her and nodded my head.

"Ranisa," an attendee suddenly caught our attention, prompting us to lift our gaze and look at him immediately.

"Kunwarsa," she said, and I noticed her eyes tense and her fingers shaking as she pointed behind her.

"He has arrived," she said, her voice trembling, and I could feel my heart racing wildly in response.

"Where did he come back from?" My voice trembled as I stood up and attempted to ask.

"From the war," the attendee replied; images of blood, sword, and his near-death experience on the battlefield overwhelmed me. My head spun, dropping me to my knees.

"Suman," Nandani quickly embraced me and patted my cheeks. My heart raced uncontrollably.

"Kunwarsa," my heartbeat and breathing hallowed, and I didn't understand what had happened to me.

"Give me water," I heard Nandani's voice fade. She pressed a glass between my lips, and I felt the coldness against my throat as she gently patted my cheeks.

"He's fine, Suman. Hold yourself together," I heard her voice, and my eyes shot open at the mention of him.

I got up to run toward the main door. My legs trembled. The attendees watched me. Tears streamed down my face, and suddenly, I stumbled over a stone and fell onto my arms. A deep cry escaped my lips, and I felt Nandani's hand on my shoulder.

"Suman, calm down," she clicked her tongue, and I quickly returned to my feet.

"What happened to him?" I babbled, unable to control my swirling, dark thoughts. The priest's voice echoed, telling me I was his problem. But we weren't even properly married; how could he get the bad fortune?

I ran again and halted far from the main entrance, noticing the convoy of soldiers entering, many bleeding.

Ranaji and Hukumsa were there, too, and I approached them with my shaky feet, my heart sinking lower with every step, until suddenly, a loud cheer erupted.

"Kunwar Agastya Dev Singh ki!"

"Jai!" the crowd cheered, and my heart sank even more profoundly. My head pounded, and I stood immobile. Nandani held my hand and guided me toward them.

And the moment my eyes landed on him entering on his horse, I regained my breath.

I heard my heartbeat over the loud cheering.

He was bleeding, damped, and dirty; his eyes washed, his face tiresome.

I gulped, soaking into his presence.

He stopped, dismounting the horse. Patting Ashwait's forehead, he kissed it and strolled toward Ranaji. His steps stumbling,

and Ranaji stepped forward with a broad smile.

He smiled tiredly. Kneeling on one leg before Ranaji, he offered a blood-soaked sword with both hands, “Mehrangarh.”

"Kunwar Agastya Dev ki," Ranaji cheered in an earth-shattering voice that echoed through all the walls of Surygarh.

“Jai!” the crowd responded, and I felt a shiver run through me as Ranaji took the sword from his hands, placed a hand on his shoulder to help him to his feet, and enveloped him in a tight hug.

“You made me feel so proud, Agastya,” Ranaji said, and the crowd cheered again before he pulled back and hugged Prince Ranvijay as well.

“How dare you?” Suddenly, all eyes were on Princess Rashmika as she rushed toward him, yanked his collar, and slapped him hard.

The blood leaked through his lips.

“How could you, Agastya? I trusted you,” she slapped him three more times, and tears filled my eyes.

He stood silently as she hit his chest with her fists, crying and breaking down, until he grasped her wrists and pulled her into a tight hug.

He placed his hand on her head as she broke into sobs.

My heart broke, noticing tears in his eyes. They loved each other.

“I hate you; I hate you so much. Why? They’re my family,” she cried louder, and he spoke slowly.

“They’re alive, Rashmika. I didn’t harm them,” he said. She pulled back and looked at him. He cupped her cheek with his wounded hand, saying, “They’re safe.” He kissed her forehead, consoling her, calming her down.

She cried even more and heard her; Princess Rudraja wept.

Princess Aishwarya stepped forward to him. He bent down and touched her feet. “At least hold her in your arms for once. I’m sure you two share some connection,” she said, and he chuckled as he looked at the Princess in her hands.

She began crying even louder, and he nodded.

I chuckled when he rubbed his hand clean on his clothes before carefully holding her in his arms, bringing her closer to his chest.

She cried momentarily, and when he kissed her head, she stopped.

I swallowed hard, standing completely immobile.

Nandani stepped forward to him, and he smiled at her before bending down to touch her feet, too. She encircled her fists on either side of his head before pressing them to the sides of her forehead and shielding him from evil eyes.

"Ishwar kare ki jindagi ke har yudh me aapki Vijay ho, Devarsa," “May you win every battle in your life, Devarsa,” she said, and I broke into quiet sobs, watching him nod and move forward.

And his eyes met mine.

When our eyes met, my heartbeat slowed. My body froze, and my lashes stilled as he stared deeply into my eyes. For a moment, everything disappeared except his tired, hazy, dark green orbs. But my heart sank into a darker pit as his smile faltered, and he looked away.

Pain waves coursed through my heart as if I had smashed into a mountain.

He silently walked away, his feet trembling. I was lost—into him, by him, through and through—and an ache built in my knees, freezing me to the ground and swallowing me in.

Everyone followed him, and I couldn’t stop, either.

Everyone was busy celebrating his arrival, but I returned to the kitchen, thinking he must have been hungry.

My mind had stopped functioning. What if something had happened to him? What if he didn’t come back?

I shook my head, trying to dispel the dark thoughts, and prepared his lunch.

He was just tired. We'd talk alone, and I knew him well. He wasn’t angry—just worn out.

I nodded, grabbed the plate for his lunch, and hurried toward his chamber. A proud smile crept onto my face.

He had won a kingdom and a war, burdens that weighed heavily on his shoulders. My heart raced as I took the final turn toward his chamber.

But suddenly, the soldiers at the entrance crossed their spears before me, and I frowned in confusion. ***"Hume andar jaane dijiye, Kunwarsa ke liye bhojan laaye hai,"*** "Let me go inside; I have brought lunch for Kunwarsa," I exclaimed.

"No, Kunwarsa has instructed us not to let anyone inside.”

"Aap unse jakar kahiye to sahi ki hum aaye hain bhojan lekar, vo thake hue honge," “Please let him know I brought lunch; he must be tired,” My voice now broke, fingers weakening around the heavy metal.

"He gave us strict orders not to let anyone inside," but they stood rigid on their grounds.

“At least tell him once; he will let me in.” I insisted again with my drying throat—nervousness built in me.

They exchanged glances before one of them walked inside. I felt uneasy that they had to ask. I shifted on my feet, and a strange weight on my knees unnerved me.

When the soldier returned, I gulped, my heart exploding inside. “He asked to leave the lunch with us,” He informed, breaking the last shells of my courage.

I stood stunned and hesitated to ask again, but they denied it and took the plate from my hands.

What happened to him? Why didn't he want to see me?

I knew it was all my fault. He was angry with me.

I returned to my work area.

Maybe he just needed some rest. I should make his favorite food for dinner—I smiled at the thought.

I spent the whole evening making his favorite dishes. After cooking, I plated the food and went back to his chamber.

It had turned dark.

The soldiers stopped me again, and I begged them to tell him I had arrived, that Suman had come. One of them did, but Kunwarsa still wouldn't allow me inside; instead, he also sent the dinner back. My heart shattered.

Tears filled my eyes, and I couldn't help but try to drift off to sleep after returning to my room.

I didn't know what was wrong with him. Was it so hard for him to at least listen to me? I just wanted to express my fear, anger, and confusion about what was happening. I never intended to hurt him like that.

I couldn't sleep as the vision of him crying, knocking, trying to speak, and returning away from my door kept revolving around.

I took a deep breath and woke up early the next day. I was going to make him talk to me. I wouldn't stay idle; he had to listen to me. I prepared his favorite breakfast and entered his chambers before anyone else could wake up.

The soldiers stopped me again.

"Please, let me go inside for once. I won't cause any trouble. I won't tell him you let me in. You know I've been here before. He's upset with me. Please, help me, my brother. I promise he won't harm you, please," I begged, holding my hands together, and one of them nodded.

"Okay, but just make sure he doesn't fire us," he said, and I nodded, smiling. "Yes, yes, I promise he won't; I swear,"

I carried the breakfast plate inside.

The soft glow of the early morning sky streamed through the windows, enveloping the room in silence and dim light. The bed curtains were drawn closed, and I bit my lip, moving toward the table and setting the breakfast plate down.

I felt scared to call him out, "Kunwarsa," My heartbeats were sinking low.

He did not reply, encouraging me to stroll towards the bed and part the curtains.

It was empty.

Suddenly, I noticed footsteps approaching from the bathroom. I turned to look in his direction, and my heartbeat stopped.

His green eyes met mine, bringing tears as I noticed his trimmed hair.

The soft, long curls I used to move my fingers were gone. I gulped, fighting the lump in my throat, and my sight fell on bandages wrapped around his forehead, arms, and on the side of his stomach.

Watching him stumble because of wounds in his leg, I could not stop myself from walking towards him, offering my help. But with his blank stare, I froze.

"Let me help," I stuttered, reaching for his shoulders. He pulled his hand away from me, escaping my touch.

My heart twitched. I tried again, but he didn't let me.

He limped towards the couch.

"I brought you breakfast, Kunwarsa," my voice was shaky.

He inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. "I want to talk to you, too," I added, and he sucked on his lips and opened his eyes to look at me.

"Yes?" He asked. The pain was visible in his voice. It did something to my stomach, prompted me to step closer and say. "Kunwarsa, I am sorry. I did not know what was happening to me—"

"It's okay," He cut me off, looking down.

I tried again, "I am so sorry. I did not want to hurt you. I mean, I should—"

"I said it's okay," he said, looking at me. I couldn't stop kneeling before him, reaching for his hands. "Kunwarsa,"

But he pulled his hand back. It tightened my chest.

His gaze suddenly sharpened at me. "We cannot do this. It's over; go back to your room," He said coldly, standing up.

My heart pierced, my voice breaking apart. "I did not know what happened after seeing Princess Rashmika wit—"

"It's okay," he cut me off, "I understand. And I am not the one you want."

"I want you," I stated, and he turned to look at me.

"I do not want you," he replied.

My heart sank deeper. It broke me.

"But why?" I asked. "I know I made a mistake. I am apologizing, Kunwarsa," I explained.

"Honestly, I don't want to hurt you or myself, knowingly or unknowingly. Just forget about me and everything I said. Go back to your old life and act as if nothing ever happened between us," he clarified. I broke down in tears, moving closer to him.

"I know. I made a mistake. I should not say all of that to you. I should have listened to you, and I should not have behaved like that. But I was scared and—"

"Listen," He cut me off and looked sharply into my eyes. "I am not angry, but I cannot do this now. It is not about you anymore. It's about me now. I have nothing left in me I give you. I cannot give you anything. So, go back to your room and stop doing anything for me. I do not want to make it hard for you," his words pierced my chest.

I adjoined my hands, “I am sorry. I know I made a mistake. I did not want to hurt you,” I pleaded.

He shook his head. “You are not getting me, Suman. It's not about you anymore. It's about me. I cannot give you anything. It was not your mistake; you only said what you perceived of me. And I know it's my mistake; you only called me something I was, I am, and I always will be. So, do not make it more difficult for you. I am not the one,” His voice was calmer than ever.

"You are; I am sorry," I broke into cries.

He smiled, shaking his head. “You are just being emotional. Give yourself time, and you will know I am not the one,”

He sat on the edge of his bed, and I couldn’t stop kneeling before him. “Please, I am so sorry. I did not know what I was doing. It's just I was hur-”

"I am a man whore, Suman," he broke us, raising his voice, all of a sudden. I was stunned.

“I am still the same person who hugged Rashmika. And yes, I hugged her in front of everyone. I am still that same person—the cheater, flirt, and manwhore, with whom you can never spend your life. Don’t make it difficult for yourself. It’s a ‘No’ from me. There’s no love now. You made your decision, and I accepted it. Now, I am deciding for myself; accept that,” he said, and I broke down in tears before him.

“I did not know. I do not know; please forgive me, please,” I begged.

And after a few moments, he silently placed his hand on my head and kissed it.

“There is nothing to forgive, Suman. It's just I cannot do this anymore. I do not want to be myself anymore. I have nothing left to give you. Please understand and leave.” He drawled, holding my hand to help me stand up.

I didn’t know how to make him understand I wanted him. I just got scared, feeling like he might hurt me. It was wrong to focus on myself at that moment. How did I tell him and understand him that this wasn’t what I meant?

It wasn’t what I wanted. I was angry. I didn’t understand why I directed all my frustration at him.

I stood frozen, crying and watching him as he walked away and lay down on his bed, covering himself with a comforter, and closed his eyes.

I did not know what to do.

Watching him walk away tore my heart apart like never before. It was something I had never experienced before.

I ran away from his chamber and went into my room, crying my heart out. I didn’t know what to do. How could I hurt the person who cared for me so much? Hearing those things from him hurt me beyond.

After crying for a long time and reflecting on what had happened in the past few weeks, I realized I wanted him back.

I had to win his heart again; I couldn’t hurt us like that, especially when I knew how it felt.

I stood up and returned to work. I couldn’t lose hope; I would win his heart back. He had to love me in return. How could he say 'No' to me when he wanted me? He was crying for me just a week ago. I knew he was lying.

The next day, I got ready, promising myself not to cry anymore and to fix my mistakes. I couldn’t afford to lose him.

After dressing in plain yellow attire, I entered the kitchen and began preparing for the day. I sent his breakfast with an attendant, and at lunch, I plated it and went to give it to him.

The physicians had advised him to rest and care for his wounds so he would lie in Nandani’s chamber under the sunlight with the Princess.

It must be over now since I said ‘No’ once, and he did, too. His anger seemed to have subsided. Moreover, he wouldn’t talk to me, so I could seize this golden opportunity to get him to speak.

Smiling, I took the lunch directly to Nandani's chamber.

He lay on the carpet under the sunlight, savoring grapes with Princess Rudraja. Holding myself, I stepped closer. He looked dangerous and intimidating with trimmed hair.

“Papaya, you know, people say the sun remains steady while we revolve around it,” he told Princess, who moved her head. He gently patted her, and all she did was coo.

I couldn’t help but smile, walking closer and placing the plate before him.

He glanced at me briefly as I sat beside them. I placed my hand on Princess’s belly and smiled at her. “Ah, what are you doing, my princess? Are you enjoying the sunshine?” I asked, and she looked at me and suddenly smiled.

He gritted his teeth and made the Princess look at him. "Hey, papaya, say Kaakusa."

I sighed and attempted to speak. "She’s too little to say anything. She’ll start talking after a year or two,”

He lifted his gaze to me. ***"Pucha humne, Hamari Bhateeji hai, dimag tej hai inka."*** "Did I ask? She’s my niece; her brain is brilliant."

I smiled at the Princess, ignoring his arrogance. "Come on, Princess, it's time for milk, right?"

He gently touched her stomach and tickled her a bit, asking, “Please tell me you’re not hungry, baby.”

Suddenly, Nandani interrupted, "Stop, both of you. “ She walked closer and picked up Princess in her arms. ***"Rudraja abhi***

bahut choti hai, apni bina sir, or per ki baate inse door rakho." "Rudraja is so small; keep your nonsense away from her," she added.

Kunwarsa gritted his teeth angrily at me.

He stood up; I did as well.

He stepped forward to walk away; I stepped forward to block him.

He looked at me. ***"Raasta kyu rok rahi ho, jaane do hume?"*** "Why are you blocking my way? Let me leave!"

I furrowed my brows. He tried to step past me, but I stepped forward to block him again. ***"Hum kaha rok rahe hai, aap hi idhar udhar ho rahe hai."*** "I'm not doing anything; you're walking back and forth," I said, holding back my laughter.

He brought his hand closer to my neck, and I immediately pulled away, widening my eyes. ***"Apni patni ki hatya karenge aap?"*** "You'll kill your wife?" I whispered.

He gritted his teeth with frustration, warning in the same tone. ***"Dekho hume dawai ka nasha ho rakha hai, hamare sir me dard mat karo."*** "See, I'm under medication, so please don't irritate me,"

I lowered my gaze to the plate, responding innocently. ***"Hum bhala apne patidev ke sir me dard kyu karenge?"*** "Why would I trouble my husband?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. I didn't know why, but I enjoyed irritating him like he did initially.

"Hamari yaadhash chali gayi hai," "I have lost my memories," he exasperated, gazing intensely into me.

I narrowed my brows, stepping closer. His eyes widened with shock, and I noticed his gaze lowering down to my lips.

"Hum le aaenge wapis," I promised him.

"It's okay; I'll bring it back," I joshed innocently, staring into his darkened green eyes.

Silence followed as he whispered over my face, "You're wasting your time." His intimidating gaze weakened my knees, but I affirmed, *"Hum haar nahi manenge."* "I won't stop trying."

He took a faint breath. ***"Or humse Aaj Tak koi Jeet nahi paya,"*** "And no one has ever beaten me."

The danger was obvious in his voice. This wasn't a joke or raillery. He was serious—more serious than I had ever seen him before. He was beyond angry—hurt and heartless.

I gulped as he turned away. But I would win him back. Agastya Dev Singh was mine.

I knew I hadn't told him everything. But he had to accept me because I couldn't imagine being without him. His rejection slit my heart. His 'No' was more brutal than blades.

I inhaled deeply and returned to work, asking an attendee to take his lunch. He wouldn't eat if I took it, and I knew he was stubborn. So was I. I didn't meet him afterward; for days, I tried to talk to him, but he ignored me. He spent most of his time with Princess Rudraja or alone, always busy. He avoided his chamber, knowing I would seek him out. Instead, he mingled in the garden, spent time in Prince Ranvijay's chamber, and returned at night. He was recovering quickly, and each day, I felt more impatient.

But my patience snapped when I learned Ranaji had asked him to marry Princess Rashmika.

Everything had happened because of her, and now the wedding?

I had two thoughts. First, Kunwarsa had nothing with her, and second, there seemed to be something between the two of them—a soft corner or perhaps something deeper.

And I came in the middle.

The thought alone made me restless. I was trying hard to fall asleep but couldn't. Throwing the comforter aside, I sat up, wishing to be in his chamber. But, he must have been sleeping at this dark—past midnight.

But I had to talk to him, too.

Regardless of everything, we shared a history, and I refused to let my efforts go to waste.

Honestly, I was confused, but deep down, I knew I couldn't avoid him. I could be angry, upset, frustrated, or anything else, but his face was something I wanted to see every day.

I realized it only after he returned from war. It changed something in me.

Inhaling deeply, I palmed my face. *You are a gone case, Suman.* I had to see him.

I couldn't stop, wrapped a shawl around, and left for his chamber.

I knew it would concern us if anyone saw it, but I couldn't care less; I had already gained fame among the attendees, and I had overheard their gossip about me.

I walked through the galleries and arrived at his chamber. The soldiers standing outside glanced at me and halted my progress.

"He is resting, you cannot go inside,"

I inhaled profoundly. ***"Dekho hamara unse milna bahut awashyak hai, ye hamare jeevan ka prashn hai,"*** "See, I need to see him; it's about my life,"

They looked at each other.

I added, "Do you know how difficult it is for a woman to be used and then ignored by a man? He used me, and now he's

acting like nothing happened. You both are complicit in this by preventing me from going inside." I lied. I had no other option. It crushed my self-respect, but at this moment, he was important.

The silence followed before one of them gulped and stepped aside. "But, remember, he must not fire us."

I stepped inside, and my gaze first landed on the empty bed. Then I noticed the dim lighting. I scanned the room, but he was nowhere to be found.

"Kunwarsa," I called out, stepping further in.

A sudden shift in my heart accompanied the realization of his absence; it felt like the calm before a storm.

I bit my lip and moved toward his changing room. He wasn't there either. Maybe he was in the bathroom. I checked, but he was not there.

Nervously, I blinked and reached for the handle of the reading room door. He must be there. Pushing it open, I stepped inside and looked at the table and the empty chair.

Yet the lamps were lit. A sense of dread crawled over my skin as I took more steps inside. As I walked past the shelves, I finally spotted him sitting against a wall in the corner, near a lamp, with a book in his hand.

But he was asleep.

My heart sank further as I looked at him. It pierced my chest to see him sitting like that—his knees drawn up to his chest and his head tilted back against the wall.

I gulped silently and walked toward him.

Feeling my presence, he opened his eyes and looked at me lazily.

Inhaling deeply, he thinned his brows and palmed his face with slight frustration.

"Kunwarsa, aap apne bistar par kyu nahi so rahe?"

"Kunwarsa, why are you not sleeping on your bed?"

I tried to ask in a slow, polite voice, pouring all the honey I had in my body, and he stood up on his feet while replying.

"Tumse matlab," "None of your business,"

My teeth greeted me in anger. I could not sleep because of him, and he was throwing tantrums.

When he tried to walk past me, I grabbed him by his chest and pulled him closer.

His eyes widened in shock as our bodies crashed into each other.

"Hai matlab, poore gao ke saamne sher banke maang nahi bhari thi aapne hamari. Jara si ladai karli to aapke matlab khatam ho gae?"

"It is my business. You filled the vermillion in my head like a brave person in front of the entire village. And suddenly, with a little fight, it's none of my business?" I asked, my voice rising slightly but in a whisper to not wake the whole Kingdom.

He stared into my eyes, and his hands held my wrists, trying to push my hands down. I tightened my fists even more and stared back into his eyes.

"You are getting married to Princess Rashmika?" I asked in a slow voice. He lowered his gaze to my lips, lifted it back to look intensely into my eyes, and nodded briefly. "Yes, I am,"

My anger rose to another level, and I pulled him even closer.

"Don't you dare, Kunwarsa," I warned.

And he gritted his teeth before saying. ***"Vivah bhi karenge, suhaagraat bhi manaenge or chote chote pyaare pyaare bache bhi paida karenge,"*** "I will get married, consummate the marriage, and give birth to small, beautiful kids with her,"

I lost it and felt him pushing my hands down his chest. My knuckles whitened with the strength I was pouring.

But he was stronger, and there was no chance I could hold him against his will.

He jerked my hands low and exclaimed. ***"Hamare beech me ab kuch nahi hai, or na kabhi hoga,"*** "There is nothing between us, and there won't be anything,"

Hearing him, I gulped and fought back my tears. He walked away, and I couldn't stop chasing him, grabbing his wrist and pushing him against one of the shelves.

His eyes widened with shock.

"Hamare beech kuch nahi hai matlab? Itni aasani se bol denge aap. Kuch din pehle to aap ro rahe the hamare liye, Ab aapka prem khatam ho gaya,"

"What do you mean that there is nothing between us? How can you say that with such ease? You were crying for me a few days ago; now your love is over?" I asked and felt the shelf shake slightly with his muscular frame.

He gritted his teeth and looked intensely into my eyes.

"Natak kar rahe the. Tumhe pata to chal hi gaya tha. Ab ye sab kyu kar rahi ho?" "I was acting out. You figured it out, didn't you? Now, why are you behaving like this?" he asked in a low but frustrated voice, and I couldn't help but raise my voice.

"Aapko samajh nahi aa raha hum ye sab kyu kar rahe hai? Hume nahi achi lagti Rajkumari Rashmika ya koi bhi, jiske baare me aap soche, baat kare ya parwah kare," "You are not getting why am I doing all of this? I do not like Princess Rashmika or anyone you think about or you care about,"

He inhaled sharply and moved forward. A chill ran down my spine. I quickly stepped back. My body pressed against the wall, and I looked into eyes, boring into mine with anger.

"Kyu? tum hoti kon ho jiske ache lagne ya na lagne se hume antar padega?" “Why, who are you, and why would your likeness matter to me?” His words infuriated me even more, and I couldn’t help but exclaim.

"Patni hai aapki, aapko antar padna chahiye" "I am your wife, and it should matter to you,"

He thinned his brows and inhaled deeply, hearing me.

"Dekho hume gussa mat dilao," "See, do not enrage me," He said, and I thinned my brows.

"Hum gussa dila rahe hai aapko. Aapne hume tang kiya hua hai. Humse seedhe muh baat nahi karte, hume nazar bhar dekhte tak nahi, hamari parwah nahi karte, hume sunte nahi, or kuch nahi karte, sirf hume mehsoos karate hai ki hum aapke jeevan me kuch nahi hai," "I am enraging you? You have spun my whole life. You do not talk to me, you do not look at me, you do not care about me, you do not listen to me, and you only make me feel I am inexistent to you," I said, and he stepped even closer to me.

"Patni?" "Wife?" He muttered and looked into my eyes.

"Badi achanak yaad aaya tumhe. Abhi to kuch din pehle to tum humse keh rahi thi ki hamare beech me kuch nahi rakhna. Pata hai tumhari pareshaani kya hai. Ki tumhe hum to chahiye, hamara ateet nahi chahiye. Hamara pyaar to chahiye par apna nahi dena. Tumhe har cheej apne hisaab se chahiye or hume ye nahi chahiye. Isliye pehle bhi do teen baar samjha chuke hai or fir samjha rahe hai ki humse door raho, khush raho or bhool jao," “Oh, you remembered it all of a sudden. A few days ago, you said there was nothing between us, and that you don’t want that either. You know what your problem is? You want me but don’t want my past. You want my love but aren’t willing to give yours. You want everything on your terms, and I can’t accept that. That’s why I have told you before, and I’m repeating it: stay away from me, be happy, and forget about it.” He intoned, and I inhaled deeply, hearing him.

He took a step away from me, but I immediately grabbed his chest and pulled him back. Our lips almost brushed each other. Our breaths united when I asked. “And what about what I want now?"

Our gaze met. He gulped, shut his eyes briefly, and pushed my hands down.

“Suman, you are just angry. This is not who you are. This is just your anger, nothing more. You might want me now, but after two days, you’ll say that you don’t trust me, you don’t feel good with me, and you don’t want to see me, and I shouldn’t have saved you and entered your life,” he said, and I bit my lip while shaking my head.

“I was just angry,” I attempted to convey, and he gazed into my eyes.

“And you still are. You don’t understand that I have nothing left in me to give you. I can’t love you anymore; I can’t hold your pain anymore because I have my own to bear. Please, don’t make it harder for me. It would never bother you as much as it bothers me. You’d easily get back to work, forget about me, and be happy,” he said, and I shook my head.

“That’s not true. You know I’m not like that,” I tried to say, and he took a deep breath and mumbled.

“I know what is true; clearly, you don’t understand. I wasn’t the one who entered your room first. You came into my life, into my chamber that night at midnight, seeking comfort. The moment I asked for it back, you showed that I’m not the kind of man who should be seeking comfort. You might have feelings for me, but you don’t grasp that I am inseparable from my past. A man whore, you called me, and I’m not someone made for you. Honestly, I don’t want someone in my life who would try to make me feel disgusting about myself. I’ve spent my entire life running from that feeling, and I do not want it to plunge into that well for the rest of my life.” His eyes were strained, and his voice turned hoarse as I swallowed, pushing the lump back down my throat.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know what happened to me. How would you react if you saw me hugging another man?” I asked, and he chuckled, lowering his head for a moment.

“Honestly, I wouldn’t have felt anything. I trusted you. I knew that if you had feelings for me, even if you didn’t confess, I understood them and tried to prevent you from falling for me. I always told you that I wasn’t the good man you think I am. I knew you were falling for me. And I fucking trusted you. I didn’t stop you from meeting another man. I didn’t stop you from marrying someone else. Even if I had seen you hugging a man or kissing someone, I would have thought maybe he was just a friend or someone in need. Or I might have lost it, thinking he was forcing himself on you because I knew that if I saw those feelings for me in your eyes, you would never betray me,” His voice raised in the end, and I trembled, listening to him.

“That’s because I don’t have a past with many men, and you’ve never seen me flirting with anyone. That’s because I’m not that kind of woman,”

“Can you prove it?” he asked me out of nowhere.

I was shocked. "What?" I thinned my brows.

"Yes, can you prove you did not meet any men, did not like anyone, look at any, or flirt with any? I have known you only for the past few months. How can I know everything about your past and trust what you say?" He asked, and I gritted my teeth and could not stop slapping tight on his cheek.

“How can you say that?” My body was seething with anger as I looked into his eyes, turning red with rage. How could he question my virtue? “How can you even think that about me? I told you I did not see anyone, did not meet anyone, did not flirt

with anyone, and shared everything about my past; how can you say that?" my voice raised in anger.

He took a step away from me and sucked on his lips for a moment. His green eyes were dangerous when he said in a slow voice.

"You want me to trust what you say about yourself, but when I tell you that I don't have anything with Rashmika—she's just my friend—you say you don't believe me. That hurt you, didn't it? I mentioned it just to make my point, and it already hurt you so deeply. Imagine what I went through when the only person I trusted poured my heart out, told everything about my life without wrapping it in gold, did not even try to listen to me for once, for even once, Suman," he said slowly. I blinked silently, comprehending what he meant.

"That is the problem. If we were together, you would never believe what I say; you would always think based on your understanding. You would trust your perception of me. And that perception is of a man whore who would cheat on you and be constantly whoring around. No matter how much I try to prove myself, you will always, always have this doubt within you. And I do not want that. I don't want you to suffer with these doubts and hurt yourself because of me. You deserve a man, a virgin man; it doesn't matter if he loves you or moves mountains for you; you would be happy and satisfied if he had no past with other women. Trust me, he is the only kind of husband who can keep you happy, or else you should stay single, and either way, forget about me. Because leave about you, I do not want a woman to whom I have to explain everything and constantly rub my nose in it just to make her listen to me. I am done with you, Suman. Get it into your head," he said in a slow and calm voice, and I gulped silently. I watched him walk away, and tears streamed down my cheeks. I yelled back in anger.

"Fine, I will marry Bhan Singh then,"

I gritted my teeth and watched him disappear. I burst into tears and shook my head. Wiping my eyes, I walked out.

I saw him take his overcoat from the couch and leave the chamber with quick steps.

I immediately ran after him and grabbed his hand.

"Where are you going?" I asked. He turned to look at me and cupped my cheeks, urging me to meet his gaze. The sudden effect made me shift onto my toes.

His eyes were filled with tears, and he gulped before speaking.

"Suman, this is just going to hurt both of us. Please, think and give yourself time. You'll figure out what you really want. I am not the one you want,"

I shook my head and tried to respond. "But you are the one I need," I said. He closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against mine.

"You will understand in time," he said, stepping away from me.

"And don't worry. I won't do anything that will hurt you. And never think there was or will be anyone else in my heart. If it's not you, then it's no one else,"

He said and walked away from there.

I silently let the tears flow down my cheeks, trying to steady myself. My breathing heavied. After crying my heart out, I wiped my tears and walked away after he left.

For a few days, I was furious and distraught with him. I couldn't believe he left me alone when I cried and begged him to stay. I needed him the most when I didn't know what was wrong with me. I needed him to hold me tight.

I was waiting for him to return. Days turned into weeks, and now it has been over eight months since he had been gone.

After a few months, my anger faded, and I began to return to my daily life. The smile that had once vanished from my lips slowly returned with the events unfolding in the Kingdom.

Princess Rudraja was growing up. She started eating solid food and became a bubbly, stubborn, and active child. When Nandani would tire, I would take her with me. Unknowingly, she always reminded me of her Kaakusa.

I spent most of my time talking, laughing, and playing with her. Her birthday was approaching, but not just yet.

Kunwarsa had been in Mehrangarh since he left, while Princess Rashmika had been in Suryagarh. At Ranaji's request, they both refused to marry.

Meanwhile, I learned that there is such a thing as a woman having feelings for another woman. I was shocked when I first found this out.

But Nandani explained it to me, and then I understood that Princess Rashmika and Kunwarsa never had feelings for each other. She loved someone else, and that someone was a woman.

After knowing that, I felt foolish. Very, very foolish.

I wished I had listened to Kunwarsa that day and tried to believe him when he said they were just friends.

But let bygones be bygones.

Surprisingly, after he left and after all the time I spent alone, missing him, not just emotionally but also lovingly and admiringly, I realized something different within myself.

Now, there was calm. It was suddenly silent.

After he left me, I understood what had happened to me. I learned that despite telling him I would never judge him or that his

past wouldn't matter to me, it did. Because I was feeling for him. I was developing feelings for him.

When I married my dead husband, I also told him that his past didn't matter to me. I was a happy girl back then; I didn't know what heartbreak meant. I didn't realize the power my dead husband held to break me.

But this time, when I told the same thing to Kunwar Agastya, I was not a happy girl but a suffering woman who knew what this man could do to me. That's where my insecurity and distrust grew.

Unknowingly, whatever he told me about his past, I unconsciously placed myself in the shoes of one of the women with whom he slept and left. But I failed to understand that it was consensual, as those women also didn't want anything more from Kunwarsa.

Meanwhile, Kunwarsa didn't share all of that to hurt me or to make me feel like one of those women. I failed to understand that he confided in me because he sought comfort. He wanted to lighten his burden and make me feel more important in his life. He wanted me to believe that I was the one who deserved to know.

But instead, I messed up badly and ended up doing things I would never do to anyone else.

I was so caught up in my fear of getting hurt and pushing him away that I ended up hurting him. Nandani was right. I made it all about myself when it wasn't about me at all.

He was always helpful, loving, caring, and responsible toward me.

And I ended up comparing him to my dead husband, which he was not.

I was measuring this one parameter between them. The term "man whore" was traumatic for me. I couldn't focus on anything else when it penetrated my mind.

I couldn't think beyond or less than that. I couldn't grasp how or why Kunwarsa was sharing this with me.

And genuinely, I was wrong. He was not.

I didn't trust him when he repeatedly insisted that Princess Rashmika loved someone else.

I chose to believe my own eyes, trusting only what I thought would bring me pain.

With my eyes, I also saw him caring for me, fighting for me, loving me, making me happy, laughing with me, and bringing joy to my life. But due to my insecurities, I ended up focusing on other things I had seen.

I could have handled it better.

Over these months, I understood that, like me, he had gone through something traumatic and unhappy. Even though my experience was more painful, it didn't mean his was any less significant.

Still, he remained there to protect and care for me, never making me feel wrong about myself.

Now, I was happy. I discovered what was wrong with me, and I was working on it.

Honestly, I realized far too late that the problem was not in him but in me. If there had been any other man, even someone who had never been in a relationship with a woman, I would have reacted the same way.

So I didn't need to taunt him about his past or make him feel bad about it.

But I think he knew. He knew what was happening to me. Thankfully, he left to give me time to reflect and think. If he had been here, I would never have understood what his presence meant in my life or what his care, love, and affection were worth. But all in all, things were getting better.

Another three months passed, and Princess began to speak a few words, though they were not understandable.

She was beautiful, and there was another good news: Princess Aishwarya was now two months pregnant, and Kunwarsa did not know about it. He was busy implementing new rules and policies in Mehrangarh and looking after the Kingdom. Princess Rashmika seemed happy, but I still did not know who she loved.

He was infrequent with his letters, only sending them to Ranaji. Nandani asked me a few times if I wanted to call him back. She told me he would come back if she asked Ranaji to bring him, but I declined. Now, I wanted to respect his decision, just as he respected mine. Honestly, I missed him very much.

Tomorrow is the Princess's first birthday. I knew he would come, not for anyone but for her. After all, she is his favorite child. I felt a strange happiness bubbling inside me. I was under my comforter. It was past midnight, and I couldn't sleep anymore. I didn't know what I would do when I saw him, nor did I know how he would react to seeing me. Would he still be upset about it? Would he be happy to see me? Would he be missing me too?

I didn't know, but I wanted to see him with longer hair now. I didn't like the trimmed look; it intimidated me dangerously. I didn't know if he would ask me if I was okay, and I didn't know what was happening to me.

I couldn't sleep all night; I felt butterflies and knots in my stomach. I got out of bed early, and even the attendees woke up before me. It was a celebration in the Kingdom: the Princess's first birthday. The Kingdom began to fill with guests. King Abhinandan and his family arrived, and even people from Songarh came. It seemed like a grand celebration was underway. But my heart was fluttering for one man.

"Suman," Nandani called to me, and I turned to look at her. "Are all the guests' rooms ready?" she asked, adjusting the dupatta on her head after feeding the princess and putting her back to sleep.

I nodded with a smile. "Yes, all are ready," I replied. She walked toward me and hugged me gently before cupping my cheek. "Kunwarsa Agastya will arrive today, so get a bit ready," she said, and I smiled, shaking my head. "It's fine. I'm okay," I said,

returning to continue making the *ladoos* I had prepared with the attendees in the resting area of Nandani's chamber.

The entire kitchen was in chaos. I didn't know why, but I didn't want his attention anymore. I was content like this. "Is Kunwar Agastya's chamber ready and clean?" I heard Nandani ask another attendee, raising her voice slightly. "What are you doing? Do it quickly," she urged, and I just smiled, focusing on the *ladoos* I was shaping.

All I wanted was for him to look at me with love-filled eyes for once—My Shringhaar would be done, my responsibilities fulfilled, and love would bloom.

I didn't realize that Nandani had left with all the attendees for an important guest arriving in the Kingdom.

I was suddenly distracted by the Princess's crying. I looked around to see that no attentive caretaker was present.

Where did everyone go?

I stood up and quickly washed my hands before entering Nandani's bedroom and approaching the Princess. Only a select few could touch her. The attendees could care for her and inform Nandani, but they could not get too close because of security reasons.

"Awww, my baby," I pampered, lifting the Princess into my arms. I patted her back as she cried even more.

"What happened to my sweet little pumpkin? Maasa? Do you need your Maasa?" I brought her out of the bedroom, but all she could do was cry.

"Aaeeeeee, aaaaaaaattttttaaaaaaattttttaa, ummmmmmmmm,"

"Awww, baby, calm down; she will be back. Do you want to eat something sweet?" I asked, trying to divert her attention.

She made faces, and I wiped away her fake tears. "Awww, did you have a bad dream? Don't worry, your Baapusa will take care of all the demons," I murmured slowly, but she turned her gaze toward the *ladoos*.

"Taaaaaattttooooooooooooo, Aaaaaaaattttttttaaaaattaaaaaa," she cried out, leaning toward them.

I sighed and put her down, watching as she reached for the *ladoo* plate with her little hands.

I smiled, sitting beside her. "Oh, you want to make sweets for your birthday yourself?" I asked, returning to making the ladoos, listening as she babbled away.

"Aatttaaaataaaaaaaa," she said, tasting the ladoos and messing her fingers up.

"How does it taste, Princess?" I asked with a smile.

She looked at me wide-eyed and smiled as she savored the sweets.

Like uncle, like niece—always hungry for sweets.

A crimson blush crept onto my cheeks, recalling some of our sweet encounters. Suddenly, the princess crawled, placing her hands on my thighs to lift herself up.

"What happened, baby?" I asked, feeling her place her hands on my shoulder and back. Suddenly, my dupatta slipped down, and I chuckled.

"What are you doing, my Princess?" I asked, feeling her tiny hands on my back, taking help to walk a little.

She fell to her bum.

"Aatttttaaaaaattttttaaaaaaa," She cried, and I laughed a little.

I never understood what this meant.

I focused on making ladoos while I felt her tiny hands on my back, trying to lift herself to her feet again. Her fingers hooked in my blouse, and suddenly, I thought, she hung on the string of my blouse and pulled it open.

"Princess," I immediately exclaimed, and the blouse loosened even more as I tried to turn behind.

I looked at her, and she smiled, showing her small little teeth, and did again.

"Aaatttaaaattaa,"

Then she turned her head away and laughed, slapping her hands on the floor, and I heard a slight chuckle.

I froze.

My heartbeat stopped as I lifted my gaze and looked at him, sitting two meters away, smiling at the Princess. His hair had grown longer, and he appeared even more muscular. I gulped, taking in his black attire.

Was it a dream?

Suddenly, he lifted his gaze to look at me, and thousands of butterflies erupted into my stomach. The goosebumps appeared, staring into his green orbs shining bright in the sunlight.

He pulled Princess into his arms, and I shivered when I heard Ranaji's voice.

"Agastya, you are back?"

I immediately pulled my dupatta and ran from there.

Princess' voice faded. "Luuuuulllllllllllllll, taaaaaataaaaaaaaaaa,"

I hid in the corner and held a passing attendee's hand to ask her to tie my blouse's strings.

Did he ask Princess to do that?

What?

How?

And why?

And, just by looking into his green eyes for once, I still felt a flower blossom in me even after a year.

My heart, which felt calm and at peace, suddenly jerked alive and now beats fast for him.

I did not know what kind of power he held over me. It all began with needing him for comfort and protection, which then turned into wanting him more and more, blindly, at any cost.

This started hurting me, and when he left, I thought that maybe I would manage to get over him or at least make peace with him.

Here we are again.

But I didn't want to talk to him. Not after whatever I had done to him. I still didn't know if I was good for him now or not. I didn't want to hurt him anymore.

I gulped and silently walked to the kitchen to check on the preparations.

Nandani sent attendees to call me for the Hawan and donation ceremony, but I kept telling them I would join in a bit, as I was busy with something urgent.

And then, suddenly, she came by herself.

"Suman, what the hell are you doing?"

I lifted my gaze from the dough I was kneading for the guests' Pooris and looked in her direction. She looked beautiful in her orange attire, and I gave an embarrassed smile and tried to respond.

"The cooks are busy, and I need more help here," I gulped. I didn't know why I was trying to hide.

"Shut up," she said, taking my hand to lead me out of the kitchen. She asked me to wash my hands once we reached her chamber.

Everyone was outside, and I didn't understand why she brought me here.

"Change," she stated, widening her eyes, but I shook my head slightly.

"Nandani, seriously, I'm not feeling up to it. There's so much work pending, and I'm menstruating too," I tried to lie, but she stopped to look into my eyes.

"Oh, I didn't know," she muttered. "Um, you should take a rest then. Don't work," she said, and I immediately regretted saying it.

"No, no, I'm perfectly fine. It's the Princess' birthday. I want to be part of it. Plus, the Kingdom is flooded with guests, but you know," I inhaled deeply, and she gulped. She smiled and cupped my cheeks to make me look at her.

"You're trying to escape from him," she said in simpler words. I tried to shake my head but eventually closed my eyes, agreeing.

In direct terms, I was doing exactly that.

"But why? It's not like he will eat you," she said, and I opened my eyes to look at her.

"Trust me; he's busy with Rudraja, Rudra, Prince Ranvijay, Nandan, and the guests. He hasn't even had time to talk to me properly. They're discussing politics. So, calm down," she said, gently patting my hands. I tried to nod.

"Alright," I muttered.

"Now, get ready. What will I tell Rudraja once she gets older? What were her Maasima and Kaakisa doing on her first birthday, hiding from her Kaakusa?" she said, and I couldn't help but chuckle slightly.

"Please, Nandani," I managed to say, holding her hands in mine.

"You know I'm not family and never will be. Don't make me see dreams I'm trying to forget. I messed up, and he doesn't want me anymore," I tried to explain, and she stepped closer.

"Tumhe bada pata hai unhe kya chahiye or kya nahi. Pichle ek saal me aath rishte thukra chuke hai vo. Jab se Mehrangarh ka yudh jeeta hai tabse aath rishte, samajhti ho kitne hote hai. Sabke liye mana kar diya hai unhone,"

"Oh, so you know what he wants or what now. He has rejected eight marriage alliances in the last year. Ever since he won the war of Mehrangarh, he rejected eight girls. Do you understand how many that is? He rejected all of them," she said, and I lowered my fluttering gaze, biting my lips.

"But I might hurt him more, or what if he doesn't want me anymore?" I tried to ask, but she inhaled deeply and made me look at her.

"Rudra bhi yahi soch lete na ki, kya pata Nandani ko me chahiye bhi ya nahi or hume dard denge to aaj vo Ranaji bhi nahi hote, hamare pati bhi nahi hote, or Rudraja bhi paida nahi hui hoti,"

"If Rudra also had thought like you that maybe Nandani doesn't want me, or he might hurt me more, then maybe he wouldn't be the King, nor would he be my husband, and Rudraja wouldn't have been born either," she said, and I lowered my gaze with mixed emotions. She placed her hand on my chin and made me look into her eyes.

"Do you know what you want now? Do you have that clarity with you? Suman," she asked. I looked at her face for a few moments and nodded slowly.

"What is it?" she asked, and I bit the inside of my lips and blinked silently before answering.

"I want him, and I think more than wanting, I need him, Nandani. He is the one who can handle me and hold me together. I mean, imagine he made me insane for him. What kind of power does he hold over me?" My voice came out slowly, and she

smiled at me.

"Do you love him?" she asked, and I nodded slowly.

"I do, and now I know why it happened—because I love him," I drawled. She kissed my forehead and caressed my cheek gently.

“Then it's worth fighting for, Suman. All he wants for you is to be happy and healthy. Prove to him you are happy and healthy with him, not without him,” she suggested, and I asked.

"How can I prove that to him? Nandani," my voice hoarse, a lump formed in my throat.

She smiled weakly. "When you’ve figured it out this much, you’ll know more, too," she answered.

"Bhabhisa,"

Hearing his voice from outside the chamber made butterflies flutter in my stomach.

I lowered my gaze and adjusted my dupatta as Nandani replied. "You can come in, Devarsa."

I shook my head at her, and she just smiled at me.

I turned around, hiding my face, and acted fixing the misplaced items when I heard him say, "It seems like Papaya needs her meal. She is crying a little and feeling irritated."

"Aaaeeeeeeettttaaaaaaaaa, aaaaaaammaaaaaaaaa,” Princess cried. I heard Nandani's anklet chime as she walked toward him, closer to the door.

I didn’t dare turn and look at him, knowing that if I gazed at him one more time, I would break into tears.

My heart sank deeper, and I glanced at my fingers, trembling and shaking.

I couldn't believe how and when I fell for him this hard. The closeness to him was overwhelming, as was the distance.

"Aww, my baby, why were you crying, hnn?" Nandani asked, and I heard the princess reply,

"Aaeeetttaaaaaaaattttaaaaaaaaaa."

I gulped and lowered my gaze when, suddenly, Nandani said,

"Suman, can you bring some warm water?"

I knew she did it on purpose. He wouldn't have noticed me there, but he knew I was present when she called my name.

I turned slowly, trying not to look at him, focusing solely on Nandani as I nodded.

I immediately tried to hurry out of the room, but not so fast that it would reveal my anxiety to everyone.

I was walking quickly through the gallery, my fingers fidgeting with the end of my dupatta.

And suddenly, I felt my hand held by a solid yet gentle grip.

I turned back, my eyes widening in slight shock. My heart raced wildly as I looked into his eyes.

My fingers shook badly, and tears suddenly welled up in my eyes. Warmth rushed to my cheeks as I locked eyes with him. Memories of his warm comfort, his voice, and everything I longed for blurred my mind.

He stepped closer, wrapping his arm around my waist. Slowly, he pulled me into his arms.

My chest visibly rose and fell with each breath, and my hand snaked around his neck to support my weight.

Suddenly, the world faded away with his presence, and I felt his arm on my back, gently drawing me closer to his chest.

My eyes blinked nervously as I wrapped my other arm around his neck. His cologne filled me in, giving rebirth to every dead portion of me. My fingers tangled in his hair, fisting and pulling him even closer while my eyelashes fell shut, unable to hold back the tears building in my eyes.

I broke into cries.

I squeezed into his arms, and tears streamed down my face.

"I hate you so much," my voice came out hoarse and trembling as he pressed his cheek against mine and his lips against my neck.

"I hate you too, so fucking much," his slow, tearful voice made me cry even harder, and I felt him leading me to his chamber.

Agastya

With each passing day, I watched the blanket of stars spread across the dark sky, shining like pearls and then transforming into thick clouds—thundering, lightning, and raining—reminding me of the distance between us.

Each shiver I felt under the naked sky on the cold roof of Mehrangarh's chamber made me wonder why I wasn't with her.

But then, a painful memory would make me sigh deeply and remind me not all possessions are loving; some can feel like slavery.

But day by day, the sting of those words softened, replaced by smiles of such beauty, allure, and vitality that took my breath away. The bright, innocent, yet possessive and empty eyes, screaming for love, blurred my vision. Eyes that used to look down in moments of confusion, uncertainty, and self-doubt. Her lips, which called me 'Kunwarsa' and curved upward whenever I teased her, constantly reminded me of my responsibilities.

A corner of my heart still beats for her.

Even in the chaos, pain, and separation, the memories of her brought a smile to my lips each day.

My mornings would begin with an impatience to return to the Kingdom, hold her tightly in my arms, and tell her how much I loved her. But as the sun reached its zenith, spreading warmth everywhere with everything it had, sanity would envelop me, reminding me of what she endured because of me. By evening, I would resolve that I was not helping her, but increasing her pain. Finally, at the end of the day, I would go back to sleep, feeling an uneasiness as well—one that pertained to the heartache she experienced with my presence.

To distract myself from her, I engaged in more physical activities, such as exercise, fighting, and horseback riding. Yet, during these months, all I felt was the desire to be closer to her.

Each time I reminded myself that I caused her pain, a thought occurred to me that perhaps I was the one who could help her relieve it.

I felt very weak and lost when I left Suryagarh.

But now, I was no longer that way. I realized that I shouldn't feel bad about whatever she said. She was my wife; she could feel hurt if something related to me caused her pain. She had the right to be angry with me and to hurt me.

I shouldn't have felt bad.

However, I needed time.

Now, I was heading back home almost after a year, and I wasn't sure if she would smile when she saw me. I didn't even have the courage to face her. Knowing how much I had hurt her, I didn't have the strength to look into her eyes.

I only knew that I would celebrate the Princess's birthday and return tomorrow.

I was a mile from the Kingdom, and my heart was pounding wildly. I could feel the sweat on my palms, and I didn't understand why Ashwait ran even faster.

I took a deep breath before entering the Kingdom, but my heart sank even lower.

Calm Down. She will not eat you.

I did not know what to do now.

After putting Ashwait in the stable, I walked through the galleries. The attendees smiled and bowed to me. Officials recognized me and inquired about my well-being.

It was merely a formality; nobody cared about my feelings.

I sighed deeply and walked straight to Bhaisa's chamber to meet my princess. As I entered the expansive chamber, my steps slowed as if my heart instinctively knew she would be there. I could hear my heart pounding loudly.

Yet, a part of me wanted to meet her, ask if she was okay, and discover if she was feeling better without me.

My heart sank even deeper, and eventually, my heartbeat stopped when I saw her step out of Bhabhisa's bedroom with Rudraja in her hand. She was smiling, and just seeing her smile caused a grin to appear on my lips out of nowhere.

She looked beautiful, as always, in her simple clothes. There was a fresh glow on her face, and the moment she laughed with Rudraja and wiped Rudraja's tears, I couldn't help but bite my lip to keep myself from smiling.

My babies were close to each other.

She didn't notice me watching her place Rudraja next to her before she sat down to make ladoos. The other attendees saw me and walked away at my signal.

Rudraja squealed, turning her head to me. I grinned. And, as I stepped closer to her, she started laughing.

She turned her head back to the ladoos and picked one up. After tasting it, she smiled at Suman, and I couldn't help but think how great she was with babies.

As I approached them, Rudraja stood on her feet. She had even pulled her dupatta down—mistakenly—and I couldn't help but gulp as I gazed at her back, sparkling in the sunlight. A deep black mole on the side of her waist caught my attention.

My lower lip curled inward, pressed between my teeth.

Rudraja fell. Suman chuckled softly. I adored them in silence.

I sat down behind her and looked at Rudraja, who tried to stand up again and look at me. She pulled herself up with the help of Suman's thighs, back, and arms. She gripped her tiny fingers on Suman's blouse's knot.

As she glanced at me, she nearly stumbled again. I gestured for her to grab the string of Suman's blouse while holding onto the strings of my overcoat.

"Tataaaaattaaaaa," She squealed, asking me in nods. I nodded back and she laughed even more. Suddenly, when she was about to fall again, she pulled the string off her blouse.

I couldn't control my smile.

Suman flinched and turned to face her. Rudraja laughed, slapping her hands against the floor, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

She may have sensed Suman's anger as she quickly crawled toward me. I pulled her into my arms and lifted my gaze to look at her shrinking *Kaakisa*.

Her expression shifted from surprise to shock when her eyes met mine. I froze for a moment, watching the glow of her face fade to pale, and suddenly I heard my *Bhaisa*.

She immediately ran away, and I felt my heart ache.

I tried to stay composed in front of my Bhaisa as he took me to meet the officials of the Kingdom. Rudraja, in my arms, started playing with my face and laughing. But as soon as she spotted her *Bade Kaakusa*, she leaned toward him.

"How are you, Agastya?" Ranvijay Bhaisa asked as he took Rudraja from my hands. We hugged tightly.

"I'm doing well, Bhaisa. How about you?" I asked, and after a while, the layer of formality between us tore away.

I met King Abhinandan, Queen Trisha, and all the guests. After meeting Aishwarya Bhabhisa, I learned that she was expecting. My happiness soared to such heights that I couldn't help but lift her into my arms. She squealed, and I quickly set her down. She gave my cheek a gentle slap, and I felt like I was on cloud nine. "Finally, another baby; it'll be a boy, I know," I said, and she chuckled, shaking her head gently.

"We cannot say yet," she said, and I nodded silently. I asked her how she was doing and watched her play with Rudraja.

Rudraja was everyone's favorite. Her unique quality was that, at such a young age, she knew who her family was. She would reach for her Maamusa, Naani, or grandmother's hand, recognizing everyone. She even knew Eklavya.

The craziest thing about her was that she was trying to call everyone by their names.

I laughed so hard when she attempted to call Bhaisa 'Luuuuullllllll.'

But even among my family, I felt an emptiness. I couldn't find her; she wasn't around. I could sense that she was distancing herself from me. Part of me felt guilty for making her feel that way, while another part feared she might feel the same.

Suddenly, Rudraja began to cry in Ranvijay Bhaisa's arms, and I took her in my arms.

"Maybe she is hungry," I said, and Rudra Bhaisa said.

"She is hungry. It's her feeding time,"

"Lullllllll, taaaaataaaaaaaa," she yelled at Rudra Bhaisa in frustration. Hearing her, all I could do was laugh.

"Baapusa bola karo, pitayi hogi varna aapki," "Call me Baapusa, or you will be slapped," Rudra Bhaisa said, cupping her cheeks. She shook her head and smiled, showing her teeth.

"Alright, my little princess, let's take you to your mother," I said as she rested her head on my shoulder, singing softly. I couldn't understand the words.

When I arrived at Bhabhisa's chamber, I attempted to call her to request permission to enter. She invited me in, and I informed her that Rudraja was hungry.

She held Rudraja in her arms and blurted.

"Suman, can you bring some warm water, please,"

My heartbeats stopped, and I turned to notice Suman standing a little away from us, her face opposite.

I gulped nervously as she turned towards me. She didn't even glance in my direction, and I felt an ache.

She nodded before silently walking away, and I couldn't help but follow her.

The gallery was empty, with only a few attendees drifting into other areas. Everyone was engaged in the gathering. She was hurrying, and I could sense her falling apart at any moment.

My hands ached to hold her tightly in my arms and tell her everything I wanted to express. I wanted to apologize for all the pain she felt because of me.

I jogged a bit and slowed down to match her steps. I took a deep breath before grasping her wrist. She visibly shivered, and I felt her shrink away from my touch.

My heart heaved as she turned back to look at me. Her eyes reddened when they met mine. My hand wrapped around her waist. She blinked nervously. The pain was etched on her face, the silence thick with it. She hesitated, shrinking into me.

I lifted her into my arms, sensing her slight trembling. Her eyes widened a bit, and I pulled her closer to my chest, tightening my grip to hug her.

The feeling of her fingers fisting into my hair, pulling me closer, and pressing into me, broke me into crying. She broke into tears as well before murmuring slowly against my neck in her shaky voice.

"I hate you so much," she said, tightening her fingers in my hair. I closed my eyes, surrendering. Her warmth calmed, held, and healed me, and I felt frustrated knowing I could not exist without her.

"I hate you so fucking much," I muttered back. My voice had grown hoarse and dry from crying, and I glanced at the

attendees watching us.

I sucked in a sharp breath and turned my feet to take her to my chamber.

Before I entered the chamber, I signaled the guards standing outside not to disturb us.

It was clean and scented with fresh fragrances.

She cried even more, and I tried to calm her down.

"Shhhh, calm down," I begged, sitting on the bed. She straightened up and cupped my cheek in her hands.

"Hume Kshama kar diye, Kunwarsa, humse galti ho gayi. Hum aapko dard nahi dena chahte the," "Please forgive me… Kunwarsa, I made a mistake. I never meant to hurt you," she sobbed even harder. Her voice was strained and hoarse.

I shook my head and held her tightly in my arms.

"No, please do not cry," I whispered over her face and wiped her tears. She shook her head.

"I am sorry, I am so sorry," her voice broke.

She grew impatient and pressed her lips on my right cheek. My face lowered, and I tried to calm her down. "Suman,"

She kissed my cheek and jaw and the other side of my cheek and jaw and reached down to my neck.

"Suman," I intoned, unable to suppress a weak smile. A fresh tear rolled down my cheek as she lowered her hands to my neck, cupping it gently and pulling me closer, bringing her lips near mine.

My breathing was already quick. Our noses collided as I tried to pull away and cupped her cheeks to stop her.

She shivered and sniveled.

"Calm down," I requested and pressed my forehead against her. "I am here with you," affirming her.

She clutched my overcoat and drew me closer to her, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Kunwarsa," she muttered, growing restless as I pulled her closer and tightened my grip around her.

She pressed her lips against my cheek restlessly, and I closed my eyes, pushing my hand onto her hair bun and tightening my other arm around her as well.

Her breathing appeared uneven and restless, and I could sense panic in her actions.

"Calm down, Suman. I'm here," I whispered, pressing my cheek against hers.

She gave in slowly, and I felt her fingers fisting on my shoulders restlessly and suddenly circled them around my shoulder and neck.

We had never been closer than this before.

She moaned as I pulled her painfully closer, my arms crushing her bones. We closed our eyes, breathing into each other, licking the old wounds, and realizing how much we needed each other.

Her scent calmed my racing heart, and she relaxed in a few moments.

There was peace all of a sudden.

Her breathing returned to normal, and after a while, I sensed her slowly pulling away. She gulped, gazing into my eyes, and I silently stared back into her red, swollen, tearful ones.

Her gaze flickered to my lips for a moment, and then, without warning, she slapped me.

My hand instinctively found its way into her hair bun, pulling her perilously closer to me with anticipation. Her lips quivered, her heart raced again, and a soft cry escaped her lips.

"Anhh,"

I gazed into her eyes and noticed her parted, trembling lips hovering just above mine. She was only a centimeter away and all vulnerable.

"Esa prem hai aapka. Hume akela chodkar chale gaye," "This is your love. You left me all alone," she quivered, allowing a fresh tear to roll down her cheek. Her chest raised up and down with short and uneven breaths.

"Kam se kam prem to hai. Tum to vo bhi nahi karti," "At least I love you. You do not do either either," I complained, and she stared silently into my eyes with anger and affection.

"Kisne kaha nahi karte," "Who told you?"

She breathed shakily, breaking into tears, and closed her eyes while pressing her forehead against mine.

"Bahut prem karte hai hum aapse Kunwarsa," "I love you a lot Kunwarsa," She sucked in a deep breath, trembled under my hold.

"Bahut bahut bahut jyada, itna ki shayad kabhi kisi se kiya hi nahi, Bhagwaan se bhi nahi," "I love you a lot, Kunwarsa. I love you so much, maybe more than I have ever loved anyone, even more than I love God," she confessed against my lips and brought her face closer, stretching up in my arms, pressing her lips against mine.

I pulled back a little and tightened my fist on her hair. "Ahhhhh," she moaned in pain. The bitter memory hazed my brain, and I tried to warn her.

"You will regret it, Suman,"

She shook her head and cupped my cheek to pull my face closer to her. Her fingers dug into my nape. Our breathing fanned over each other, and I said. "It could be the moment when you are low,"

She shook her head, replying. "I know what I am doing," A hint of frustration lingered in her voice as I asked again, staring at

her lips, trembling for me. "Are you sure? Suman,"

She nodded and fisted on my collar to pull me closer than ever. My lashes forced closed as she pressed her lips against mine.

I inhaled profoundly, feeling the force in her lips, sucking onto mine.

I froze. Gave in. Lost.

She nibbled my lips, and I couldn't help but cry out in pain. "Uhmm,"

She lifted herself, pressing her knees on the side of my waist over the bed, never leaving my lips. I felt her fingers fisting into the back of my hair. My face tilted back as she poured her fierce passion into sucking my lips.

My hands crawled over her half-naked back. My fingers tangled into the strings of her blouse, and I could not help but pull her closer to me.

Our chests crushed into each other, the heat seeping through our clothes, igniting each other. Her dupatta fell off the shoulder, and she muttered against my lips. "Take me, Kunwarsa,"

And I could not help but chuckle.

"What?" I asked, noticing her face immediately emerge from the haze and stare back at me in confusion.

"Hn?" She blinked nervously, stamped, stepped away from me, and gulped silently as she pulled her dupatta up to cover her head.

"Umm, Sorry, I am sorry, I... I did not mean... it," She stumbled and stepped back from me, so I quickly stood up, grabbed her hand, pulled her back, and nuzzled her down onto the bed beneath me.

We fell on the bed. The old wood creaked. Broke. Earning a slow scream from her.

Everything went black.

For a few moments, we both could not understand what had happened.

I looked at the broken bed, and we were lying in it.

Stuck.

She looked into my eyes with embarrassment and redness on her flushed face, and I laughed a little.

She blinked timidly and tried to push me away from her.

"Kya hua? Abhi to tum keh rahi thi?" "What happened? You were saying something a few moments ago?" I teased.

She gulped, shaking her head, and tried to push me away slowly.

"Nahi, vo to bas, jaban fisal gayi," "No, no, it was just my tongue slipped," She muttered with breathlessness.

I looked into her eyes.

"Dekhlo, soch samajh kar bola karo, varna jis din haath lagogi, palang joot jaega," "See, speak wisely, or the bed will break whenever I will get hold of you," I muttered playfully. She inhaled deeply, staring back into my eyes.

"Bass bass, itni bhi jaan nahi hai aapme," "Stop, you are not that powerful,"

I lifted my brows, and she tried to pull herself up.

I blocked her, and she looked into my eyes pleadingly.

"Jaane dijiye na Kunwarsa, koi aa jaega, dekh lega, Poora Mehal atithiyon se bhara hua hai," "Let me go, Kunwarsa, or someone will come, someone will see; the whole Kingdom is crowded with guests,"

I felt her breath brushing against my lips, and I asked slowly. ***"Naraz ho abhi bhi?"*** "Are you still angry?"

She shook her head, gazing into my eyes, and I cradled her cheek and kissed her nose, saying. ***"Ab ho bhi jaogi to hum jaan laga denge tumhe manane ke liye. Jitni baar dil todogi, utni baar samet le aaenge tumhare liye, magar aana tabhi jab man ho, dukh or khed se mat aana,"*** "Don't worry; I'll move mountains to make it up to you whenever you feel angry. I'll gather all the pieces of myself for you each time you break me, but come only when you're ready, not when you're feeling regret."